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Literatures in India

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES

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I want to begin my talk with a simple observation about languages in India: namely that we live here in an *ambience* of languages. And this is a situation that is unique to India. A person who becomes literate in English may not tend to learn other languages. But it is likely that a less literate person will know more languages: a coolie in the Mysore bus stand would more often than not be able to speak in Urdu, Telugu, Tamil and Kannada, and even in English to a certain extent. In the past, I presume Shankaracharya must have spoken Malayalam in the streets and Sanskrit with his peers. Madhvacharya must have spoken in Tulu in his village of Shivalli, in Kannada outside his village and in Sanskrit with his equals. It is evident that people could do their work in Sanskrit in spite of living in small places such as Melkote and Udupi

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because they had an access to libraries in a way that is not possible anymore.

Today, Prof. Narasimha has asked me to talk about Indian writers. We find that some of the most well known among them, like Salman Rushdie, write in English. Rushdie's writings have a value in the western world because they contain the spirit of Bombay Hindi. Likewise the celebrated Malayalam writer, Arundhati Roy, writes an English that emerges from a Malayalam context. Therefore, regardless of the language of Indian works, some sensibility which is inherent in one language gets into another language. This is not true of many other countries in the world.

A K Ramanujan, who has been my translator, has a very interesting short poem in which he says that he spoke Tamil in the kitchen, Kannada on the streets and English upstairs. He spoke in English upstairs because his father, who was a professor of mathematics, had a room upstairs and insisted on speaking to his son in English, which he thought would help him get around in the world. A hundred or hundred and fifty years ago the father would have spoken to the son in Sanskrit or Persian, but now it is English. In the kitchen the language is Tamil, because if he is very hungry he uses the 'house' language - I don't use the word mother tongue anymore because there is nothing like a mother tongue in India as there is for

Europeans. Occasionally, in Europe, there are writers such as Conrad, who wrote in English although his 'mother tongue' was Polish. But this is not so rare in India. Some of our best writers in Kannada have been Tamil and Marathi speakers. Masti was a Tamil speaker, while Bendre, perhaps the greatest among our poets, spoke Marathi. Bendre's rhythms and images are so fascinating that it would have been probably even beyond him to explain how he got them into his poetry. I once asked Bendre about this question of being a Marathi speaker and writing such great poetry in Kannada. He told me that he had not been aware of the fact that he was speaking two languages until he was 12 or 13 years old. While he was saying this to me, his daughter-in-law, who was perhaps from Maharashtra, had whispered something to him and then he talked to her in Marathi – without knowing that he was talking in Kannada to me and in Marathi to her. He would shift from one language to another easily. So, while he was talking to his daughter-in-law, I got confirmation of what he had said a moment earlier.

We have therefore in India a 'house' language, a 'street' language and a language for intellectual communication. The street language here is the language of Karnataka, that is Kannada. The language at home could be Marathi, Urdu, etc. And there are many reasons for keeping our home languages – or so-called mother tongues – alive. One reason

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would be to facilitate relationships based on language; for instance, an Iyengar girl knowing Tamil can get married to somebody in Tamil Nadu while a Muslim girl in Bangalore can get married to someone in Hyderabad. Ramanujan has done excellent work in three languages, i.e. Tamil, Kannada and English. He is a marvellous poet in English. He has done translations into English of Tamil classics, and these have become so important that Harvard University has recognised Tamil as a classical language. Sanskrit India was known to the rest of the world through Schopenhauer and others; in recent times Ramanujan has been one of the great interpreters of *non-Sanskritic* India. He has written a fascinating book called *Folk Tales from India*. This was again possible because he lived in an ambience of languages in Mysore. Such an ambience has nurtured creativity in India; I therefore believe that we should not politicise and emotionalise the language issue.



When Prof S Radhakrishnan was the President of the Sahitya Akademi he said, 'Indian literature is one although it is written in many languages'. I once mischievously changed this sentence into 'Indian literature is one *because* it is written in many languages'. I say this because the civilisation and culture of India are unique in many ways. I shall explain this by taking the example of the concept

‘Unity in Diversity’, which is often used to describe India. If we think that India is essentially one and only one, then India will assert its diversities. States like Assam, Tamil Nadu and Punjab have asserted themselves because our rulers in Delhi wanted to impose on us a certain concept of the Centre. But when all the diversities begin to assert themselves too strongly, we begin to assert that there is only one reality in India: the ‘one’ gets importance.

This is so in civilizational questions as well. If somebody were to say that Kannada literature is born out of Sanskrit and does not have a distinctiveness of its own, I would say ‘No, Kannada literature has a strength of its own, like Italian or French or Spanish literature’. To explain this let me take the example of *Kavi - rāja - mārṅa* which was written in the 10th century, delineating the art of writing poetry and creating literature. The author, who was a Kannada theoretician, said, ‘*Dhwani embudu alankāra*’, which means *dhwani* is also another *alankāra*. *Dhwani* means suggestion and *alankāra* means rhetorics. In poetry, the literal meaning of *dhwani* is not suggestion but the meaning that comes through when words are put together. So the writer is of the opinion that *dhwani* is not a new theory and it need not be given any special status. This reveals that already in the 10th century a Kannada writer had contested a Sanskrit view.

Another example is that of Pampa Mahākavi of the 10th century who wrote the *Mahā-bhārata* in Kannada, in a work called *Vikramārjuna Vijaya*. Pampa was a Jain, the conversion having taken place in his grandfather's time. While on the one hand he was proud of the fact that his grandfather had been a reputed brahmin, known for having conducted big yagnas, on the other he had a problem with making Krishna the hero in his *Mahā-bhārata* because it went against his religious principles and his ideological position. So instead he made Arjuna the hero of his work and equated Arjuna with his own Hindu king Ari Kesari! So *dharma-nirapekshata* has been practised in India all the time! Pampa practised it by writing a poem without making Krishna the hero, and shifting Arjuna to the centre stage, and at the same time extolling his own king. Pampa also introduced into his work an *alankāra* which is absent in Sanskrit, and called it *samāsālankāra*. Using this *alankāra* he made parallel comparisons between the achievements of his own king with those described in the *Mahā-bhārata*. The *samāsālankāra* has not been appreciated by English-educated critics like T N Srikantiah, who, like many of us, was influenced by western literary notions. But there are many interesting indigenous critics without an education in English, and one such critic of Pampa in Udupi considers *samāsālankāra* as his major contribution because with this *alankāra* he could make the *Mahā-bhārata* contemporary. In other words, it means that there was somebody in the

10th century who had the courage – who was not frightened – to intervene into a mega-text like the *Mahā-bhārata* and make his king Arikesari a hero, like some English novelists of today who are putting Indira Gandhi and others as characters in the *Mahā-bhārata* and making parallels; of course Pampa did it in his own way.

Therefore, if one were to assert that there is only one truth in India, i.e Sanskrit India, then I would disagree because Kannada has its own truth. Neither is it true that Kannada and Tamil are mutually exclusive, nor are they incomparable with the languages of the rest of India. If this is argued then I will take up the other position. This is the essence of intellectual cultural debates in India. That is why unity in diversity is a meaningful idea.



The next point I would like to make about Indian languages is that there is a *hunger* of the soul, like the hunger of the body and of the mind, and this also brings about creativity in languages. In any society, the ruling classes gain a certain amount of knowledge and achieve a sense of well-being, but then they begin to be very contented, and are soon ignorant of life beyond them. This happens to all of us in India, which is why we say there are two Indias: one is that India to which the upper classes (like the scientists)

belong, and the other is Bharat to which the lower classes belong. This is one of the criticisms against the intellectual classes in general and not scientists alone, but I mention 'scientists' because of the presence of so many of them here in this audience! This has been true throughout Indian history. One can become a great logician and get lost in the intricacies of Vedic interpretation, and forget the 'soul-hunger' which sometimes manifests itself in the poorer classes. This happened in the 12th century in Karnataka when there was that soul-hunger in shudras and other lower classes. There were some people who belonged to the upper classes but – as it happens in every age – they committed themselves not to their own class but to the lower class. They felt a need for an immediate sharing of the urges of the soul. Thus began the *Vira-saiva* or Lingayat movement. Basava who was a brahmin gave up his pride and talked to the very poor. In Pampa's times those who could read must have been a limited class, and those who could read Kannada could perhaps also read Sanskrit; but Pampa wrote his epics in Kannada.

This happened in western society as well; for example, before Shakespeare's time the literate in England could read English as well as Latin. Thus, Mulcaster wrote in English on very scholarly topics that at that time could have been easily written about only in Latin. He says in his introduction that it would have been easier for him to

write in Latin because it has good grammatical rules, while English had no rules or proper spelling. Then he asks, 'Why should I write in English? Those who can read English can also read Latin. *Yet, I write in English*'. I think civilizational creativity belongs to people like Mulcaster. Though it would have been easier for him to write in Latin, he chose to write in English, thereby beginning a great Renaissance. Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelly and Keats came later on, bringing a richness to the language which it did not have earlier. English had to triumph over the language of the ruling classes. Similarly Pampa wrote in Kannada with an overall Sanskrit model though he had made some changes in the model like the introduction of *samāsālankāra*. This was because the frame of expectations of the reader is unconsciously present before a writer who is aware that the reader has read Sanskrit and hence will expect some of the qualities that he admires in Sanskrit works to be present in Kannada as well. Similarly, in the present day, a person reading Kannada or Tamil may also have read English and therefore may expect some qualities of one language to be present in the other. But this was not the case with the *vacana* literature or with *Kumāra-vyāsa*.

The Marxists of today talk about the concept of a 'mass' audience; Soviet writers had an abstract concept of a 'mass' audience and 'mass' needs, defined for them by the cultural secretary of the government. A lot of foolish things can

happen when one has this abstract concept of mass audience. I do not believe in that concept, although there is a mass audience for commercial purposes like popular cinema and the popular novel.

The hunger of the soul led to movements like that in the 12th century which attracted an immediate audience cutting across both the lower and higher classes. The movement drew an immediate audience because great values, such as *kāyakave kailāsa* (which means manual work is holy), were asserted by people working close to nature. Mahatma Gandhi could do it during the freedom movement by drawing ordinary farmers as well as intellectuals into a movement devoid of caste and class. The *Bhakti* movement also did it with poets like Tukaram in Maharashtra, Meera in Rajasthan and Krishna Chaitanya in Bengal. Therefore we find that the medieval period in India was not the dark ages that it was in Europe; it was instead the time when the shudras and women were empowered. During the *Vira-saiva* movement, for example, women were told that menstruation is not polluting. This was a great act for change in one's concept of pollution, because unless the concept of pollution is changed one cannot change the caste system. The *Vira-saiva* movement did so, and became purposeful. Also, since there was an immediate and remarkable response, there was no expectation of a Sanskritic model, which had been essential for the older classical writers like Pampa, Ranna, Janna and others.

Some of this *vacana* poetry has been translated by A K Ramanujan in his book *Speaking of Shiva*. This book has influenced poets the world over. It contains Basava's *vacanas* which can be taught anywhere in the world without much cultural explanation. Allama, who was one of the *vacana* poets, reads very much like a modern French poet. The poetry is very sharp: words are not wasted, there is no descriptive indulgence at all. It is immediate, and has the brevity of *sutras*. A *sutra* is considered to be an *alpākshara*: i.e. it does not have too many *aksharas*. So *alpākshara* was the aim of *vacana* poetry. I think the modern mind is unable to achieve it.

All kinds of people wrote *vacanas*. There is even a prostitute who wrote some *vacanas*, but unfortunately we do not have all the ones she wrote. Her name is Sangavva; and she says, 'I am Sūle Sangavva', which means 'I am Sangavva the sex worker'. Basava preached that one should not be ashamed of one's occupation; and she was not ashamed of being a prostitute.

All these poets have a signature line. Basava calls himself *Kūdala Sangama-Deva*, which means 'the lord of the meeting of two rivers'. Allama is a very abstract poet. His signature line is *Guheshwara*, which means 'the lord of the caves'. *Akka-mahā-dēvi* is another such poet, and she was in love with Shiva. Her signature line is *Chenna* -

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mallikārajuna, which means 'the lord white as jasmine'. There are only two vacanas of Sangavva, and both have the signature line *Nirlajjeshvara*, which means 'the lord of the shameless.'

This is the profound creativity which entered into a language like Kannada. It also entered into Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, and in medieval times we find that what had been exclusively Sanskritic, like knowledge of the Upanishads, also entered into our languages. In some of my writings, I use the word *jīrnāgni* for our other languages. This is a concept of *dwaita* philosophy, which says that there is a *jīrnāgni* – a little fire inside us. So the Indian languages are like a little *agni* that digested Sanskrit. Now these languages are digesting English. Basava and Allama were great *jīrnāgnis*. They got everything from the Upanishadic lore into Kannada. It became *dhyana* of a very deep kind.



The *dāsas* were another group of poets who came later on: *Purandara-dāsa* lived at the time of the Vijayanagar empire. Like Whitman, Purandara has written on almost everything in the world. Hegel in his great philosophical work said that a great dialectic will be born in India, but its growth into maturity and completion could occur only in Europe, and that too in Germany; and then he said, 'In

my king's time it has reached its peak'. But Purandara, who lived in the Vijayanagar empire at the height of its power – when it was said to be an age of *swarna-vrsti* (which means a rain of gold) – has an amazing poem describing supreme rule. This poem has the line *Uttama prabhutva lolalotte*. *Uttama* is a Sanskrit word which means 'excellent', and *prabhutva* is another Sanskrit word and means rule; *lolalotte* is a nonsense word which means some thing that is empty, trivial – a word that children may use. Purandara is greater than Hegel to me, for he is saying, 'In the Vijayanagar empire you may say it is *uttama prabhutva* (excellent rule), but it is *lolalotte* (there is nothing in it)'. He may mean two things. One would be to think that *prabhutva* can never become *uttama* (because this is an adjective); the other is that to think that any *prabhutva* can become *uttama* and find solutions for all our problems is *lolalotte*. It is an answer to all the Marxists, because Marxists dream that when there is good *prabhutva* all our problems will be solved. According to Karl Marx a time will come when there will be no conflict and we can sit on the bank of a river and go on fishing for ever. So *prabhutva* can become *uttama*, but the state can wither away like a flower when it becomes seed and its petals wither. (But it is all the good communists who withered away in Soviet land, not the state.) These antinomies were solved by Purandara. So Purandara says that to think *prabhutva* can become *uttama* is *lolalotte*; also, even if *prabhutva* is

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uttama, then *uttama prabhutva lolalotte*. And then the poem goes on *chatra cāmara lolalotte* : all the insignia of power are meaningless. Basava also has a tremendous *vacana* which says ‘When a rabbit is killed and this dead rabbit is taken on the street, people hanker after it: they want to buy and eat it. But when a dead king’s body is taken out it is worse than the dead body of a rabbit’.

So the *Bhakti* movement at the level of revolutionary thought was profound. I think that in India we can go on even with bad government in the Centre or elsewhere only because we also have this other *Bhakti* tradition. Despite many political upheavals, India has sustained itself because there is a certain contempt for that kind of glory. This is not so in the best of Sanskrit literature. Kalidasa was a great admirer of the state. The idea of the state was important for the classical poets, whereas it was not important for the *Bhakti* poets. That is why they say that Sant Tukaram refused to go and see Shivaji. I sometimes think that it is better to take the idea of the state more seriously, particularly because one can never ignore the modern state; it is much more powerful than it was at the time of Basava, when it could be ignored.

Therefore we know that the Indian languages have asserted themselves whenever there was a need to change the audience and speak to other classes. When languages cannot

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be read and understood by an audience then mnemonic devices have become important. Works like those by *Kumāra-vyāsa* are wonderful because when they are sung one may even learn them by heart and carry them in one's memory. The *vacanas* are also very mnemonic. During the emergency when we could publish nothing, some of my friends wanted to go back to these mnemonic devices. Oral literature therefore has tremendous power and can work against any dictatorship. When a novelist writes a book, it has to be published for people to buy and read it; and it can be banned. One does not face these problems in the case of mnemonic literature like the *vacanas*, because they are carried from person to person. Some civilizations develop the capacity to fight against evil forces through devices of this kind. And all the Indian languages, including Sanskrit, of course, have this capacity which developed over a period of time.



I would like now to finish my lecture by putting before you another metaphor which I used a few months ago when I had to speak at the Nehru Centre in London. This very arrogant person who wrote *Midnight's Children* had said that Indian literatures have produced nothing worthwhile. I think he can hardly read Urdu. The arrogant statement was published in some American journal; I was

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unaware of it because I never get the journal in Mysore. But some people in Delhi had read it and began to worry about it. Apparently, he had said that despite people like me, literature in Indian languages is poor compared to the Indian literature in English. So I was asked to speak about it.

A metaphor then occurred to me and I would like to share it with you. I drew that metaphor from my own father's house in a Malnad village. The house has two prominent areas: the back yard and the front yard. Middle and upper class people came to the front yard to consult my father about auspicious days according to the *pancāṅga*. Sometimes *Kumāra-vyāsā* was read there, and people would come to listen. Since my father knew English he would read Gandhi's weekly *Harijan* and translate it for his visitors. So the *vyavahāra* world and the political world dominated the front yard. Inside the house, there is a cool inner yard where women – even of lower castes – could come, sit down on a mat, and chat. Farther inside is a kitchen which even Father could not enter if he was wearing a shirt: it was Mother's domain. And then there is the back yard. I have become a writer because I frequented the back yard much more often than I did the front yard. In the front yard I heard all things connected with the state. My father was a great admirer of Goldsmith, and would talk about him in Kannada. But I got my education in the

back yard because women talked about their aches, menstrual pains, the love affairs of other women and so on: I got to know that this little village was a very complex world. Caste never mattered in the back yard. Women from all castes came and confided in my mother, and my mother confided in them. They came there to draw water, and the well was like a club. Mother would make a gift of something cooked at home to somebody's child. The back yard was also the place where herbs were grown. My grandfather, who was an Ayurvedic pandit, knew some of these herbs which he often gave to other villagers. He would tell me that when I grew up he would teach me about them: it was a great secret. Unfortunately I got educated in English and did not learn anything about these herbs from him.

In my speech at the Nehru Centre, I said the following. Indian languages have a front yard and a (vast) back yard. Many of our folk stories originate from the back yard. Some of Girish Karnad's plays are based on these folk tales. There used to be a joke that whenever A K Ramanujan came from Chicago to Bangalore, he brought all the Kannada folk tales from there and two writers got pregnant from his tales when he came here. They were Kambar and Girish. These folk tales are very rich in oral tradition. Also, whenever a new writer emerged in these languages, for instance a dalit writer, he would bring a vast experience

of dalit life into the language. A village Muslim writer would bring a vast experience of the village life of his people. When women began to write, they brought a vast experience which male attitudes would never pay much attention to. I don't think this will happen in English because Indian English writers do not have much of a back yard. They have a vast front yard and they are very conscious of it . The *New York Times* is their front yard; they write to satisfy the *New York Times*. Salman Rushdie is condemned to be clever forever because he has to sell his wares in the West. But I don't have to be clever. In England some of the best writers came from Ireland: Ireland was *their* back yard. Yeats and Joyce were Irish who brought a lot of Irish rhythm into English literature. London did not produce many great writers. The only great Londoner was Dr. Johnson. Even for America, the South has been its back yard with writers like Faulkner.

In order to be a writer it is important to live a life in a community, because with too much individualism creativity disappears in literature. There has to be a sense of a fertile community. English had it in all those countries that the British ruled. Although Sanskrit did not have its own back yard, it got enriched through the other languages. Today many of the noble things written in Sanskrit are cherished through the other Indian languages.

So Rushdie was being silly when he said that nothing happens in these languages. Many things that happen here can't be sold in the West. A very sensitive British writer who had come to the Nehru Centre meeting said, 'I don't want to read clever Indians who write to satisfy our curiosity about their own people. But I would like to read a writer who writes about his own people, for instance, about how the tribals live, about their dreams and about their thoughts'. Unfortunately Indian writing in English is written mainly for export. One can make iron implements or garments for export but not literature. Unconsciously literature has become export material. This is not the case with writers like R K Narayan, Raja Rao or Mulk Raj Anand. Narayan wrote for an Indian audience in English, and later on became famous in the West. We find that Raja Rao's great novel *Kānthāpura* could have easily been written in Kannada because it has all the rhythms of the Kannada language. In recent times huge investments have been made by publishers to promote a work, with advertisements of all kinds; so when one becomes aware of such a huge investment, it raises curiosity and the novel is read. But for the great writers of the past it took years for people to get to read them. The recognition came only after a while: it always took time. But now people are looking for the novel even before it is published, because I think modern marketing has come into it. Fortunately it cannot come into our languages, because it takes years to sell

just 2000 copies of a novel. This is a disadvantage, but at the same time such literature cannot get corrupted as easily as Indian literature in English.

There is in fact a lot of talent in English but the best of it comes from an ambience of languages. Unfortunately a writer like Salman Rushdie living in London cannot write a novel with London as its backdrop, because it will not be well received. He becomes like the Korean restaurant in America where you have to perpetually bring Korean food to satisfy the taste of American boys and girls. So Salman Rushdie is like an Indian restaurant in London; he is expected to supply Bombay stuff by writing about Indian corruption and the dark things in India marvellously. When this happens the writer loses his freedom. No writer should lose his freedom. The market makes a writer the constant supplier of 'ethnic material'. 'Ethnic material' is a horrible word: I dislike that word 'ethnic' when it is used for our languages. Our languages are called *bhasha* and have a history of thousands of years. Tamil is a great language with a history of two thousand years. Kannada has a history of a thousand years, and Marathi has had such giants like Gyanadev who is one of the great minds of the world. So one should never use such terms like ethnic material for our languages. I can write a novel in Kannada about London, or about my village. But the poor successful Indian writer in English has to write about India and live

in the West. It is a very odd kind of combination, and it has been created by the capitalist West purely for commercial purposes.



But I am also of the opinion that English is one of the languages of India, like Sanskrit or Persian. It is a language among other languages. The eighth schedule of our constitution has recognised some languages. When I was President of the Sahitya Akademi, I took the stand that the eighth schedule should be scrapped. All that happens with this schedule is that some languages begin to agitate for inclusion. The only outcome of the inclusion of a particular language is that the constitution gets translated into that language; nothing else happens. And the eighth schedule is used by politicians to create conflict and to get votes. Now that Konkani has been included there will be an agitation for the inclusion of Tulu. When this is done, Tulu votes are guaranteed. So the schedule gets exploited for political purposes. Gandhiji wanted Hindi to develop making use of elements from every other Indian language. So the eighth schedule was meant as a list of languages from which Hindi will grow. That has not happened; Hindi is the language of a particular area and will grow only there. Since that has not happened, there is no use in the eighth schedule. As President of the Akademi I had said that we are here not to recognise

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languages but to recognise literature, because great literature may occur in a language which may not even be a written language. We know that quite a few tribal languages are rich in oral literature, so we began to honour literatures produced in tribal languages.

I would like to make a humble submission to the people in the field of science here, that there is no connection between progress and quality as far as literature is concerned. When Homer wrote his great epic, his language was like Tulu. When Shakespeare wrote his great plays, English was not a respected language – Latin was being used for many purposes. So progress and great literature are not necessarily connected. Nineteenth century Russia, which was backward, struggling and furious, produced Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy who are giants, greater than the European writers of their time. A great combination that produces great literatures is pride and backwardness. Latin American literature is much superior to European literature today. After Sartre died, there are no great names in Europe, but there are great names in Latin America. So there is nothing which can prevent a great writer emerging in Tamil or Marathi or Kannada.



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In the past India was never considered as having one centre. Although Kashi was a holy place, there were holy places everywhere. If one goes to a village in Karnataka, some Lingayat saint or other will be buried there, and that will be a holy place where people go on pilgrimage. Similarly the *dāsas* have made certain other parts of the country holy. Ramanuja has made Melkote holy, Madhvacharya has made Udupi holy, Shankaracharya has made several other places all over India holy. India is multi-centred. So imposition of the concept of one centre will make all of us rise in revolt. When I got the Jnanapith Award, I quoted the poem that we all grew up with in Karnataka, *Gōvina Hādu*. The only time I saw tears in my father's eyes (he was a stern man) was when he read *Gōvina Hādu* to me. In this poem the cow wins over the tiger. This is the first Gandhian poem in any language, narrating the triumph of non-violence over violence. It is an extraordinary poem. It begins this way:

Dharani-mandala madhyad.olage
Mereyutiha Karnāta - deshadol.
Iruva Kālingan.emba gollana
Paria nān.entu pēlvenu.

The description is almost like a camera from above which narrows down from the whole globe and focuses on one cowherd in Karnataka. On a globe any place can be the

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centre. Culturally it is indeed so, although politically it may not be true. Tumkur may become the centre, Mysore may become the centre. Dharwad was the centre of literary giants when Bendre lived there. So Indian languages – big or small – never lost their belief that they can embody a central experience. That again made for unity in diversity.

Let me explain this a little further. In the Soviet Union it was always claimed that all the languages in the Union were honoured. But that was not true: only the Russian language was truly honoured. When Kazakhstan became independent, its Minister for Culture came to Delhi. Now one of my books has been translated into Russian with an introduction by a very great novelist from there. The Minister told me that my novel gave them confidence because I had written about a small community, in a regional and not the national language, and yet it had made a name for itself. So he felt Kazakhstan could also do that. I agreed. But under Russia they were told that the universal will happen in Russian, and the 'ethnic' or 'local' will happen in the smaller languages. Capitalist America is also trying to propagate the same idea through this talk about Indian writing in English, emphasising that anything great will happen only in the language of the ruling classes, and some interesting ethnic things only may happen in Tamil, Telugu, Marathi etc.

Our belief is that any language of the world, anywhere, even if it is spoken by a small group of people, may produce Homer's *Iliad*. That is how Homer's *Iliad* was in fact produced. I will tell you what it cannot produce. A language like Tulu may have a great epic poem, but a Bertrand Russell cannot write in it. Prose is artificial and can only grow with civilization and thought. It is not so with poetry. So perhaps a small essay with great intellectual ideas and rational thought is possible in Sanskrit. A language takes a long time to develop that kind of capacity in prose, to become a medium for somebody like Bertrand Russell to write in. A British poet once told me when I was a student there, 'Unfortunately I can't write like Blake because there are too many people like Bertrand Russell who have abused my language'. Once a language develops great intellectual vigour and rational thought, some metaphoric energy that it had is lost. Blake can express the most subtle metaphysical thoughts in a line. Purandara could also do that, with a line like *Uttama prabhutva lolalotte*; it is difficult to say this politically. But modern times also require the other use of languages – in the development of various sciences and so on. That is the difficulty that Indian languages have. But the plus point is that they are still close to experience. So I told the Kazhak writer that it is not possible to translate *Das Kapital* because *Das Kapital* has first to be translated into good German! When he read *Das Kapital* Gandhi asked 'Why doesn't he say

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these things in simpler language?' Similar things have been said also of Kant and others who write in very abstruse language. Our quarrel with intellectuals has been that there is nothing which cannot be put in simpler language. Some intellectual will agree and try to talk in a very simple way. Some people hide in very abstruse thought. There is a vast amount of literary criticism today which cannot be understood by anyone. I wonder sometimes if there is anything worth understanding either, because languages can become very abstract and abstruse. Indian languages are not like that.



That is the way I see literatures in India as they stand in modern times.

U R Ananthamurthy was born in a small village in Shimoga District, Karnataka, and was educated in Mysore and Birmingham. He has been a professor at various well-known universities in India and abroad, and was Vice-Chancellor of the Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam during 1987-91. His various literary works include novels, short stories, poems and essays on a wide variety of subjects. His Kannada novel Samskāra, first published in 1965, has been translated into all major Indian and foreign languages, and was made into a film which won the President's Gold Medal in 1970 and several international awards. He was President of the Sahitya Akademi during 1993-98, won the Jnanpith Award in 1995 and was awarded the Padmabhushan by the Government of India in 1998.

