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Tribute | U.R. Ananthamurthy's many lives

Apart from being an acclaimed writer, U.R. Ananthamurthy was a public intellectual, teacher and activist

Chandan Gowda



U.R. Ananthamurthy at his home in Bangalore, earlier this year. Photo: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

After **U.R. Ananthamurthy** died last week, many of the public expressions of condolence were by people who had met him on one or two occasions but remembered him vividly. URA, as Ananthamurthy was known, brought the fullest attention, warmth and care to all his interactions. There was a soulfulness to his presence. It was impossible not to be touched by him.

Born in Thirthahalli, in Karnataka's Shimoga district, in 1932, URA spent his boyhood in an *agrahara* (the Brahmin quarter of the village). His encounter with the thought of politician **Ram Manohar Lohia** and his involvement in the farmers' *satyagraha* in Kagodu, Shimoga district, in 1951, through socialist leader **Shantaveri Gopala Gowda**, proved to be a lasting influence (URA's third novel, *Avasthe—The Predicament*, 1978—is based on the life of the latter). The challenges of thinking about caste equality, the paramount importance of Indian languages for creativity and authentic knowledge, and the value of democratic decentralization remained his lifelong passions.

URA failed in science in his intermediate exams, dashing his father's hopes of his son becoming a mathematician. After months of reading the world classics (Leo Tolstoy, Maxim Gorky, P.B. Shelley), he decided to pursue English literature at the University of Mysore. Prof. **C.D. Narasimhaiah**, the distinguished literary scholar credited with the founding discussions on the idea of Commonwealth literature, was among his teachers.

Mysore was an important hub of intellectual discussions in the 1950s. Kuvempu (the pen name of **Kuppali Venkatappa Puttappa**), the distinguished Kannada novelist, taught Kannada literature at the university. **Gopalakrishna Adiga**, the famous modernist Kannada poet and an important interlocutor for URA, taught at a college in Mysore. Writer **R.K. Narayan** also lived and worked in Mysore at this time.

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After his master's in English literature, URA taught at colleges in the Shimoga and Hassan districts. He completed his PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK, in 1966. Although he was interested in doing his doctoral research on D.H. Lawrence, his adviser, Malcolm Bradbury, the novelist, got him interested in the fiction of the 1930s, the period that saw the rise of fascism in Europe. URA's research focused on the work of Christopher Isherwood and Edward Upward, both of whom had become disillusioned with communism for different reasons (I believe this dissertation will be published soon).

URA wrote *Samskara* in 1965 during his studies in Birmingham. Though his earlier short-story collections had established him as an important writer, this novel proved to be a landmark in the phase of literary modernism known as the *navya* (new) movement in Kannada (released in 1970, the film *Samskara*, based on the novel, inaugurated the new wave cinema in Kannada). It evoked immense controversy for its critical portrayal of the oppressive dimensions of Brahminical culture.

After completing his PhD in 1966, URA returned to teach English literature at the University of Mysore. He was to work there till his retirement in 1992. During his entire academic career, he wrote little by way of literary criticism in English. The world of Kannada literature and criticism was his home.

While *Samskara* ruthlessly exposed the stultifying effects of orthodox tradition and pointed at the value of individual scepticism and creativity, his second novel, *Bharathipura* (1973), explored the philosophical difficulties of envisioning liberal reform of the institution of untouchability and seemingly superstitious religious practices.

From here onward, URA's fictional works show a growing interest in looking for sources of reform and creativity within tradition, without seeking a ready resort in Western ideas of freedom and equality. His efforts to show the limitations of Western liberal thought for evolving a critique of Indian society anticipate many of the themes that came to preoccupy "post-colonial" thought two decades later.

Much of URA's written work over the last decade consisted of op-ed essays in Kannada newspapers, which have been collected in eight separate volumes. They offer exciting commentaries on the major political and social issues in the state and outside. He also published his translations of the poems of Bertolt Brecht, W.B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke and William Wordsworth. In the last few weeks of his life, he worked hard to finish what he called "a political tract", titled *Hind Swaraj Athava Hindutva?* (*Hind Swaraj Or Hindutva?*), where he examines the fate of the ideas of Veer Savarkar and M.K. Gandhi in contemporary India.

In one of my interviews with him, I had hesitatingly asked: How would you like to be remembered? He replied: "As a teacher, and a writer."

URA took teaching seriously. I grew up listening to stories about the brilliance of URA's classroom lectures from my father, who had been his student in the early 1960s. When I had completed the first chapter of my dissertation (around 2004), he asked me to send it to him. Two days later, he sent me an email full of comments and questions on that chapter. After watching the telecast of his lecture videos on major modern Kannada writers a month ago, a programme which I had designed, he had asked: "People will now know how I taught, isn't it?"

URA was a mesmerizing speaker. Listening to him was pure pleasure, whether you shared his views or not. He took all occasions seriously. I have heard him give thoughtful speeches in massive outdoor settings as well as in small school playgrounds.

URA was an intense listener too. All the details had to be in place. I would never call him unless I was certain of the essential details of an article draft he had sent for comments. *What did you think of this idea? And that phrase? Do you know where it comes from?*

As a teacher, writer, critic, activist and administrator, URA had engaged with a vast number of individuals and was a public intellectual in the most capacious sense of the term. Many students as well as non-students called him *meshtu* (teacher in Kannada). He had a special place among Indian writers for his bold embrace of the virtues and political importance of Indian language writing.

Key politicians, farmers' activists, Dalit activists and environmental activists were among URA's close friends. Although literary activism was his forte, he enthusiastically joined in with the activist efforts of backward castes and secular forces. He led a successful campaign to stop mining activities in Kudremukh, in Karnataka's Chikmagalur district, in 2001. His contribution to the shaping of progressive thought in Karnataka is immense.

The idea of an affordable common school in all neighbourhoods, which gave students a strong grounding in Indian languages, and did not discriminate on class lines, mattered deeply to him. He argued passionately that creativity in knowledge was possible only in Indian languages and that English, though necessary as a language of communication in the modern world, could not aid in this task.

The Gandhian ideal of *sarvodaya* (welfare of all) came to matter to him more and more as an alternative to the lopsided model of economic development that has become influential in our country in recent times. His advice to the Karnataka government that Bangalore be officially renamed Bengaluru aimed to subvert corporate attempts to reduce the city to Brand Bangalore.

With the ecological crisis in mind, he had wryly noted that “The earth is the only Left that we have”. His *Hind Swaraj Or Hindutva* [Share](#) concludes thus: “Humans might change after being nauseated with too much development. Or, the earth will speak.”

URA relished metaphors. He reminisced: “Basavalingappa (the widely respected Dalit politician in Karnataka) would say that when upper-caste people climbed on the backs of Dalits to get a glimpse of a theatre performance in a crowded audience, we used to think that that was part of the performance. No longer.” He loved this metaphoric description of political awakening among Dalits.

Another instance: URA would recall the socialist leader Gopala Gowda's remarks to describe the class equality-or-nothing stand of the Communists—“The communists won't share the earth until they are done sharing the sky.”

The creative use of metaphors, for him, was essential for a lively democratic politics; it might even “open the heavens”. This perhaps explains his admiration for the symbolic tactics of Aam Aadmi Party leader [Arvind Kejriwal](#), be it his all-night street *dharna* (protest) after becoming the chief minister (CM) of Delhi (“He has made the person of the CM more approachable now”), or his quiet dip in the Ganga upon arriving for his election campaign in Varanasi.

URA was unequivocal in his condemnation of violence of both the Naxal and the right-wing communal variety. Over the last few years, right-wing groups haven't missed an opportunity to attack his liberal views. None of this, however, seemed to diminish URA's equanimity; he continued to be a free intellectual spirit.

Never one to give in to worry, his actions embodied unwavering courage and wisdom. He was a moral presence, above all. In dark times like these, our sense of loss is of another order altogether.

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