

Memoir

Remembering CDN: Our English Guru

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One of the most treasured books in our Home Library is *N for Nobody: Autobiography of an English Teacher*, by Prof. C D Narasimhaiah (CDN, as he is fondly called in Mysore circles). When it was published in 1991, Prof. CDN sent us, who were then living in faraway Bastar in Chhattisgarh, an autographed copy with the inscription, '*Students of your calibre made me and made this book possible. With all my good wishes and affection, CDN*'

Could we, could any student ever, hope for a better testimonial from an illustrious teacher? The compliment was strong enough to make us feel heady; to make us feel a 'somebody', which would have been an affront to him calling himself a 'nobody'; both terms sourced from a profound poem by Emily Dickinson.

We were both fortunate in being mentored by CDN. We count that as a major blessing in our lives. If shared values are the essence of a happy marriage, we are inclined to credit the 'CDN Factor' for the everyday fulfilment in our lives. Not a day passes, perhaps, without some or the other reference to CDN cropping up in some or the other way. And he would know why. Once he told us in the class, hoping perhaps that many of us would become teachers, that the true mark of a good teacher is not how well he teaches the subject, but how deeply he can influence his pupils, to prepare them for life. The English Department in the University of Mysore under him had several illustrious names. Dr. U.R. Ananthamurthy, the Sahitya Academy and Jnanapeetha Award winning author, was one among them. Students had their own favourites among teachers. And, honestly, CDN wasn't everybody's first favourite then; but years later, when we gathered, his was the name all took with pride and reverence. Slowly, silently, his values touched the lives of his students more deeply than any other teacher. We all realised that over time.

One of the oft-made statements of CDN was that literature matters because life matters. This is what his guru, F.R. Leavis, had instilled in him at Cambridge. And CDN practised this as a teacher. The things he taught us were so many and so varied, that we can say English literature was just one among the many lessons. He did this not by way of loose digressions, but rather as points emerging from the text on hand. Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography* was a prescribed text for us. In the course of 'teaching' this, he taught us the importance of being tentative in thought, speech and writing: through use of words like *perhaps*, *may be*, *possibly*, etc; shunning the binary *best* and *worst*. The habit of seeing the many shades of grey between black and white was taught as essential for literary criticism. Again, Nehru's use of the quotes: as CDN pointed out, and we saw when he pointed out, Nehru's *Autobiography* is peppered with quotes in verse and prose from numberless writers; but there is

an 'indispensability' (CDN's term) about the quotes. As he said, you would 'miss something' if that quote was not there, and in just that measure. The lesson was: do not quote indiscriminately, merely to garnish your write-up. Internalize the quote before you use it, and quote just what is relevant, in just the right measure.

A thoroughbred pupil of F.R. Leavis, CDN turned our attention to the text, 'the word on the printed page'. Read what's there: do not under-read, do not over read, and never discuss in the air. Examine the 'functionality' of every word, every image in the poem. And use analysis and comparison as the two tools of criticism (T.S. Eliot).

Comparison had to be as wide and diverse as possible, trans-continental. He taught English Literature, but always emphasized on our responding to it as an *Indian* reader. This search for the Indian sensibility and Indian response to art made him include in the MA syllabus, writers and critics like Ananda Coomaraswamy, M. Hiriyanna, and, most importantly, Anandavardhana and his idea of *dhvani* and *rasa'nubhava* as the touchstone for checking the worth of creative writings. This emphasis on Indian response, in Indian critical yardsticks like *dhvani* and *rasa*, perhaps grew with him over the years. To the extent that when he established his dream project of a Centre for English Literary Studies in Mysore, he named it Dhvanyaloka, after the classic work of Anandavardhana!

After migrating to Chhattisgarh, whenever we visited Mysore, we invariably visited Dhavanyaloka to spend some tonic-moments with CDN. When our first daughter was a year old, we took her to CDN to seek his blessings. He said admiringly that the baby 'looks you in the eye', and asked us what we had named her. We said 'Padmini'. He said 'Oh!' and began to narrate a story contained in Coomaraswamy's seminal essay, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, on a queen with Padmini *lakshana*. Just as he began that, we could not resist interrupting him with, 'Sir, you had taught us this essay, and that is the source for her name!' He was visibly overwhelmed, whispering, 'I feel so rewarded, so rewarded!'

Years later, Padmini earned a doctorate from Cambridge University. But CDN had passed on to the other world by then. We went to Cambridge to attend our daughter's graduation ceremony, and made it a point to visit Downing College where F R Leavis had trained our guru. On return, we wrote an article for *The Times of India*, titling it, 'A Pilgrimage to Cambridge', to record our tribute to CDN.

It isn't that we were sold out to CDN. No. We were comfortable debating with him at times. After all, it was he who had taught us the 'yes, but' progression of debate as the thing to do in the 'common pursuit of true judgement' (T S Eliot). The most memorable of such debates relates to Arun Kolatkar's *Jejuri*. We were very highly impressed with this work; CDN had a different view. With his characteristic cool but stern face, he heard our vehement argument and proposed a counter to it. We finally could appreciate his point of view, and felt happy at being worsted.

CDN has a number of works to his credit. But there is one work, not the most widely known, that we would like to mention with special regard. In 1990, CDN edited, for Macmillan, *An Anthology of Commonwealth Poetry*. Besides India, poets from Australia, Africa, Canada, West Indies, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Pakistan and Bangla Desh are represented in this anthology. The collection of poems is excellent. CDN, as Editor, has contributed a General Preface and brief introduction to the poetry of each country. These are little gems! Especially the Introduction to the India section. Just thirteen pages, this is a bit no

student or research scholar of Indian Poetry in English can afford to miss. The function of poetry in India, the history of Indian poetry in English, the possibilities that were begging; and how our poets in English after Aurobindo failed both, India and poetry; are succinctly presented.

To pass from Aurobindo to the more recent poetry is to pass from tradition – the great Indian tradition carried forward by him significantly – to experimentation, the stimulus for which came almost wholly from abroad....

... the poets have seldom gone beyond experimentation and surface handling of the Indian actuality....

Dom Moraes in his *A Beginning*, a striking first effort, earned a fine reputation beyond Indian borders thanks to the Hawthorndon Prize. It won't be wrong to say that it was some kind of British condescension to an Indian poet who used the modern English idiom so competently, though there is hardly any evidence of Indianness in his poetry – this initial mistake got hardened as time went on, and proved in the long run a bad beginning for Indian-English poetry...

Referring to Kolatkar's poem, *Makarand*, in *Jejuri*, 'predictably adjudged the best by the panel of judges for the award of Commonwealth Poetry Prize as modern in sensibility, sceptical, ironic, witty...', Prof CDN makes very incisive observations. Before quoting that, it may help to reproduce the short poem:

Take my shirt off and go in there to do puja
No, thanks Not me
But you go right ahead
if that's what you want to do
Give me the matchbox
before you go
Will you?
I will be out in the courtyard
Where no one will mind
If I smoke

And now CDN's remarks, a very small sample of his class of criticism: focussing on the text with an unbiased, fearless, dispassionate and honest intellect:

Here is verse which tickles the ear and the mind by its sheer irreverence which holds to ridicule the Hindu pantheon of gods...and seeks to give a jolt to what he must think an obsolete way of life, built into unhappy orthodox consciousness, which passes for a stable and life-giving past, but now revalued by a 'progressive' mind as 'burden of the past', hindering 'development' and therefore deserves to be thrown off lock, stock and barrel.

CDN found the frontline Indian novelists in English (Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand) doing a fair job; but found the Indian poetry in English 'anaemic'. Once, during a casual conversation in Dhvanyaloka, CDN said the course of Indian poetry in English might have been very different if may be someone like A.K. Ramanujan had led it in the 1950s. This, notwithstanding the fact that even Ramanujan does not rise above 'small-scale reflections'.

Prof. CDN had a view on centenary events, which he often shared with his students. When Rabindranath Tagore's centenary was celebrated in 1961, Aldous Huxley was among the

participants. Asked how it went, Huxley whispered that it was 'mildly scandalous'. Why? Because speaker after speaker was glorifying Tagore, whereas a centenary, according to Huxley and CDN, should be an occasion to re-evaluate a person's reputation and works. In deference to this, we would like to mention the one 'problem' most of us as students faced when reading his criticism. Like Leavis, CDN cultivated a style of writing long sentences, with involved parenthetical clauses, that tested the reader's patience and made one lose the string of argument at times. This was so especially with the early CDN. His later writings are more reader-friendly.

Before we round off, one last word. It is our considered belief that every teacher of English in India *must* read CDN's Autobiography, aptly subtitled, *Autobiography of an English Teacher*. When we, his former students read it, it was like an MA refresher course. Those who have not had the opportunity of learning under him, will experience the next best thing by reading this book. Those who are Chairpersons of the Board of Studies, and complain against 'the system', will learn how CDN braved the challenges to change the status quo in Mysore as far back as the mid-1950s, and revolutionized all aspects of higher education in the English Department: the syllabus, the teaching paradigm, the question paper, and what not. Mysore – more specifically, Maharaja's College, Mysore – has produced many teachers. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, remembered every year on his birthday on September 5, is just one among these names. Padmabhushan Prof. C D Narasimhaiah, who became Principal of this College later, stands equally tall, if not taller.

May his legacy endure!