
C. D. Narasimhaiah and the Formulation of 'Indian Sensibility'

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ABSTRACT

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Prof. C. D. Narasimhaiah personifies as it were intense passion for literature and liberal humanism in world view. Born to a poor family in a small town in south India (Karnataka), he had to struggle for education throughout. But owing to his strong resolve and self-confidence, he rose to great heights in the academic world. He went to Cambridge and got his Master's degree under the tutelage of the renowned critic F. R. Leavis, and after returning to Mysore, he headed the English Department in Mysore University. He was a very influential teacher and critic, and after his retirement he established a unique 'cultural centre' called Dhvanyaloka. He was almost a 'reference point' for English Studies in India.

This paper attempts to understand CDN as a teacher of English and as a literary critic. The paper has two parts: the first part describes in detail his modernisation of the English department which entailed a total revision of syllabus with a special focus on the then 'modern writers' such as Hopkins, Eliot, Auden, and Lawrence, and Leavis (in criticism); introduction of new fields of study as American Literature, Australian Literature, and Commonwealth Literature; and text-centred analysis in criticism. The second part of the paper considers CDN's distrust of Theory in literary criticism and goes on to analyse his strong conviction of 'Indian Sensibility' and 'Indianness' in both critical and creative exercises, and relates such issues to the 'pressure of cultural identity' in the colonial world. The paper concludes that CDN was a Liberal Humanist to whom Literature was not a playground meant to play games but a profound Ashrama where one learnt the values of life and societal systems.

A scholar of passionate convictions, Prof. C. D. Narasimhaiah (CDN to his admiring friends and adoring students) was a very influential teacher and critic: as a teacher of English, he shaped the course of English Studies in Post-independence Indian universities; and, as a critic, he shaped the literary taste of generations of his students including me. In fact, the teacher and the critic are but two phases of the same sensibility. In this essay, I shall first briefly sketch his achievements as a teacher of English, and then go on to analyse certain major critical concerns and valuations of his vast body of critical writings.

After his return to Mysore University from Cambridge and Princeton, "full of buoyancy and zest for life, for literature" as he records in his autobiography *N For Nobody*, he immediately embarked upon an ambitious and extended project, with the spirit of a Crusader, introducing changes one after another till the English department of Mysore University came to be recognized as a pioneering department in English Studies.

First, he introduced new syllabuses for the Honours and M. A. programmes, with a marked emphasis on modern poetry (ie. Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot) and modern criticism (mainly Richards, Eliot and Leavis). If my memory serves me right, in the Fifties of the last century, the English department of Mysore University was the only department in which students did not study Old and Middle English, Chaucer, Prosody, and *Paradise Lost* in its entirety. Simultaneously, through special lectures and Literary Club activities (with its yearly programme of 'Trial of Milton'), he weaned away his students and most (if not all) of his colleagues from the Victorians, Saintsbury and Bradleys. ('The Trial of Milton' would be

conducted with such passion by senior teachers including CDN and his bright students like U. R. Anantha Murthy, and Milton would be debunked so ruthlessly that, perversely, after one such 'Trial' I had firmly decided to study Milton in depth and 'resurrect' him. But, when I did take special courses on Milton at Miami University, I realized that Milton deserved most if not all of the criticism heaped on him in his 'Trial.') To complement the new syllabus, he did away with the traditional question-paper pattern and introduced a different type of question paper which tested (at least in principle) the students' textual knowledge and analytical abilities. It was at this time, in the early Fifties, that he founded his famous journal *The Literary Criterion* (which is still running), edited *Nehru's Discovery Of India as India Rediscovered* so that it could be brought nearer to college students, and wrote a series of articles on Nehru and his works. Again, with the firm belief that literature should become a strong means of character-building, CDN devised a bold scheme of inter-related twelve texts for the students of General English at B. A. (This scheme was withdrawn after two years.)

Then (I believe in 1962), CDN embarked on the second phase of his project: to transform 'Study of English Literature' to 'Study of Literatures in English' in India. Toward this end, first he introduced Indian Writing in English in Graduate and Under-graduate courses, thus doing away with the traditional equation between British Literature and Literature in English. Later, again for the first time in India, he introduced courses in American Literature, Commonwealth Literature and (still later) Australian Literature as integral components of Literature departments of Indian Universities. Most of the other Universities followed his trail in course of time. Of course, it goes without saying that in his continual attempts to revamp English Studies in Indian Universities, CDN had to face stiff opposition – even virulent personal attacks – from entrenched scholars. Just to cite a couple of instances: when, with his insistence, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was prescribed as a text at the U. G. level, it was attacked as an 'obscene novel' by many teachers of English, and CDN was officially asked to give an explanation for having prescribed such a novel (N For, pp.146-148). Similarly, when he campaigned for the introduction of courses in American Literature at the P. G. level, a few scholars asked him (as CDN records in his autobiography): “Who in the four corners of the Globe reads an American book?” echoing Sidney Smith.

I began this essay with the phrase “a man of passionate convictions”; no other issue bears testimony to that phrase than the so-called 'language- literature controversy,' in which CDN was actively involved for almost two decades. Beginning with the Sixties, the British Council, abrogating to itself the right to decide what Indian students should study and what they needn't, began to campaign heavily for the introduction of 'language- oriented courses' in English departments. It was CDN who stood throughout his career for literature and the values its study is supposed to impart to students, taking on single-handedly both the British Council and the entrenched Indian scholars. In this context, CDN's address to the Summer School of English, 1966, is worth remembering. In his address, he argues that “it is disastrous to the future of English teaching to separate the two (language & literature),” that “it is a very false position to claim to teach language only for comprehension unless you are teaching automatons or dumb people,” and that “to have laughed with Falstaff and to have suffered with Lear and Cordelia is not only to know the joys of the earth but the secrets of the grave and the felicity of heaven” (N For, pp.152-176). (Today, of course, both the positions seem to be extreme and untenable.)

It was after his retirement that CDN could take up the last phase of his project. As he states in his autobiography, it had been his long-cherished ambition to build an Institute of English, on the lines of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. The result was 'Dhvanyaloka,'

which has grown to become a premier institution today, with 'scholars in residence,' seminars and symposia on off-beat topics. (One of the regular 'scholar in residence' once a year was Raja Rao. During this period, his influence on CDN was considerable.) With its rich collection of books and journals on Indian and Commonwealth literatures, Dhvanyaloka is one of its kind. In his illustrious career spanning more than five decades, CDN has written thirteen critical works, which include three works on Nehru and such influential collections as *The Swan And The Eagle* (1969), *The Function of Criticism in India* (1986), and *Essays on Commonwealth Literature* (1999).

Works edited with introductions and Addresses total up to forty. A 'Felicitation Volume,' *Theory in Practice: Essays in Honour of C. D. Narasimhaiah*, ed. D. A. Shankar, et al, was presented to him in 2001, to mark his eightieth birthday. In the course of the five to six decades during which Prof. CDN had been active as a teacher of English and a practitioner of literary criticism, he changed his views and valuations though not frequently. I remember, as his student in the Fifties of the last century, his total disregard for Kannada literature, his admiration for Donne-Hopkins-Eliot line of poetry, and his complete neglect of Indian Writing in English (Nehru being an exception). However, after his retirement and founding of Dhvanyaloka, he organized many major seminars on Kannada literature, developed an intense dislike for poets like Donne, and was one of the very few authorities on Indian literature in English. (In one of his articles, he says he has the 'dubious distinction of having discovered Raja Rao'; and he has admiringly and extensively written on Raja Rao's novels.) It is a truism that every great scholar/critic is by nature given to re-thinking and revaluations of his own and others' positions, and CDN was no exception.

However, apart from 'language-studies,' there is one field in which CDN remained unchanged throughout: he intensely disliked Theory in the beginning, and he disliked Theory till the very end. His aversion for abstract Theory is very well known to all those scholars who have read his articles and /or attended the Dhvanyaloka seminars. It was the common experience of participants (which category included almost all critics and teachers of English in India) to see CDN raise a hand and stop a particular speaker / discussant, when he /she began to wax eloquent on Derrida or Said, with a very 'polite' suggestion which ran something like this: "Fine, fine. But now, could you take up a particular text and illustrate your argument?" Most of the times, such a 'polite' suggestion was enough to crush the poor young scholar (of course, very well-read in advanced critical theory) to go red in the face and sit down, leaving his incisive argument incomplete.

It is very easy to relate CDN's distrust of theory to his mentor, F. R. Leavis, and leave it at that. And, if one does so, one will not be completely wrong. For, in the initial stages, Leavis was an undeniable presence in the writings of CDN (as his book *F. R. Leavis: Some Aspects of His Work*, 1960, amply justifies); and the recurring terms and phrases of CDN's critical work – 'challenging discriminations,' 'concrete particularities on the printed page,' 'intelligent first-hand response,' 'major and minor traditions,' etc. – all of them are from Leavis. Above all, the belief that exercise of critical activity was not a mere academic activity, and that a critic has a social responsibility can directly be traced to Leavis and Arnold. Because he took literature so seriously, he couldn't brook anything that remotely looked like playing with words, apparently lacking in high seriousness. In my opinion, this seems to be the reason for his severe critique of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. But, I would like to contend that such a view of CDN (as an Indian Leavis, to put it bluntly), is very simplistic and naïve. I would like to argue

that a serious analysis of CDN's position vis-à-vis Theory reveals something more than Leavis's influence, and that such an analysis may give us valuable insights into the very activity called 'critical practice' in post-colonial India. Before I proceed further, I would like to clarify why I have been spelling Theory with a capital T. It is too obvious a point ('mundane inanities' in the words of CDN) to need any elaborate argument that without some or any kind of theory, let alone criticism, even 'reading' a newspaper is impossible.

When we state we understand a poem / story / novel, etc., we make that seemingly simple statement against the background of a network of assumptions and beliefs, shared by a particular community at a particular point of time. The network of shared assumptions and beliefs about an author, a literary work, and the relationship between a society and the author-work is what can be called a 'critical framework.' It is not only within such a critical framework that a critic, be he Bharata or Aristotle, understands and analyses a particular work of literature. In fact, all the 'theories' propounded by literary critics from time to time – be they 'Rasadhvani' or 'Catharsis' – are only critical frameworks which make it possible for us to 'understand' and 'analyse' a literary work. From this point of view, a critical theory is analogous to the concept of 'paradigm' in physical sciences. The American rhetorician, Ehninger, calls such a body of assumptions about a particular field of knowledge 'Warrant.' Paradigms and Warrants shift from time to time.

I am not the one to suggest even remotely that CDN is so simplistic as to dislike and disregard critical theories as defined above. He is too intelligent and too accomplished to take such a position. In fact, he makes this point very clear in his well-known essay "Function of Criticism in India at the Present Time," which essay I consider a major critical document of CDN as a critic. "You owe it to your fellows," he says in that essay, "to share with them what you say and why you say it, for then, they will know in what relationship they will stand with you." 3 "Why you say it" is what a theory or a critical framework is all about. Further, in the same essay, he indicates the distance he has travelled from Leavis: "While Leavis has shown us the supreme importance of intelligent analysis, courageously undertaken and vigorously pursued, his criteria of man, society, and civilization, I fear, are not my criteria, because all the three worlds are my society" 4 If further proof is still necessary, one can go through any of his articles and be aware of the critical concepts (and their implications) like 'sahrudaya,' 'sadharanikarana,' 'hrudaya samvada,' and a host of such other seminal concepts drawn from ancient Sanskrit poetics.

I am sure that this point – that CDN is not averse to 'theories' per se need not be elaborated further. However, it is also true that he often seems to reject, offhand, almost all new theories that arose after Leavis and Eliot. "Concepts and approaches of a succession of critical positions," he states with a touch of impatience, "such as Naturalism, Contextualism, Marxism, Phenomenology, Eschotology, Structuralism, Deconstruction have all had their passing appeal by turns even as the West was getting rid of them." 5 Is there any self-contradiction involved here? Or, is it just the inertia of one, entrenched in one position, to accept anything different? I believe it is neither.

To understand CDN's critical position, we have to first differentiate between critical theories (really, critical frameworks) and Theory. To attempt a very sweeping generalization, from Aristotle to the New Critics, the West has witnessed many critical theories with their varying emphasis on the four parameters of a literary work: Author – Performance / Text – Audience / Reader – Society. However, up to and including the New Critics, at the center of all

the arguments/ interpretations/explications of the critics lay the Text with unquestioned authority and sanctity. It was the Text that gave rise to patterns of connotations, expressions of enduring human experiences, and provided a healthy and curatory commentary on contemporary society. Also, provided the Reader/ Audience was well trained and intelligent ("kavyanushilanam abhyasa vashat vishadibhute manomukure . . ." as Abhinava Gupta put it), what the Text communicated was clear and unambiguous. And then came the Post-Structuralists (including Feminists, Culture Critics, Reader Response Theorists, et al), who questioned not only the authority of the Text but also the very notion of Author and Text. (cf. 'The Author is dead' a la Barthes.) In addition to denying the authority of the Text, the Post-Structuralists brought in with all fanfare what the Eliot-Leavis-Ransom combine had fought hard against – History and Philosophy. As is common knowledge today, the Post-Structuralists deny the authority of the Text, argue that what is called 'meaning' is something that continuously differs and is deferred, and declare that literature also is 'writing' not fundamentally different from either philosophy or history. The sum total of all these arguments and their basic assumptions can be designated as Theory to distinguish it from literary theories – a Theory which is not about literature or criticism but that which constructs and constricts all categories and modes of thought.

It is this Theory, highly abstract in nature and strongly deterministic in application, that CDN distrusts and disregards. Of course, CDN is not the only one to take this position whether in India or outside.⁶ But, the fact remains that among all such critics, CDN is the one to oppose Theory most vehemently and passionately. Many factors contribute to such a position. To start with, like many other stalwarts of his generation, CDN is a committed (if that term can be used in this context) Liberal Humanist. Whatever its nature was in the 19th –century England (in fact, it was a handy ploy to preserve the privileges of the elite class in England), when it reached India through the introduction of English education, Liberal Humanism soon acquired the hue of, surprisingly, intellectual revolt. All the famous social reformers of modern India, beginning with Raja Rammohan Roy and including Tagore, Gandhi, and Nehru subscribed to Liberal Humanism; and it was through that ideology that they waged a war against the age-old evils of caste-system and subjugation of women in Hinduism. And, Liberal Humanism, with its innate faith in the goodness of Man, has always been an enemy of abstractions. To the early social reformers of India, it was Abstraction that lay at the core of all the weaknesses of the Indian society. Hence, most of them welcomed, in a way, English education in the 19th century and its allied empiricism. All Kannadigas are familiar with the courageous statement of the great Kannada poet-thinker Kuvempu (Dr. K. V. Puttappa, the first Jnyanapith awardee in Kannada) that but for English education he would have spent the rest of his life sweeping the floors of others.

More importantly, India has proverbially been a land of Logocentrism through and through, where the 'Centre' in all fields has been viewed as sacrosanct. Be it God X His creation, King X his subjects, Father X his children, Husband X his wife, Man X the rest of the creation – in all the fields, the binary hierarchy privileging the first term has never been questioned. The Buddhists attempted 'decentering'; but very soon they created another Centre in the Buddha and His words. The 'Shruti' (what was 'heard' – the Vedas) has been held with such reverence for two millennia that in course of time, very intricate mnemonic strategies (such as Ghana and Jate) were devised to preserve the pristine purity of every word and its intonation. As a matter of fact, most of the quarrels – and long-drawn debates – between the theists and atheists in the past in India revolved more around the authority of the Vedas ('vedapramanya') and not the

existence of God. As a corollary, the rich tradition of aesthetics and poetics of India, from Bharata to Viswanatha, spanning a period of about one thousand years, kept the Text at the center of all their analyses and commentaries. In short, to an Indian, steeped in such a Logocentric /Phonocentric tradition, the abstract theories that question the Centre and the Text can never mean much. And, CDN is a scholar who feels Indian tradition and culture in his very bones.

Consequently, the criterion overriding all other considerations of a great literary text written by an Indian was, to CDN, 'Indian Sensibility.' After all thematic and linguistic considerations, what CDN asked about the work was whether it reflected 'Indianness.' CDN has attempted on different occasions to explicate what he means by 'Indian Sensibility' and 'Indianness.' In one of his essays in *The Swan And The Eagle*, CDN quotes Aurobindo approvingly (and, to him, Aurobindo was the only original Indian critic of modern times): Poetry does not depend on the individual power or the vision of the poet, but on the mind of his age and his country, its level of thought and experience, the adequacy of its symbols, the depth of its spiritual attainment.

In a moving passage in *The Function*, CDN delineates Nehru's Indianness in these words: (Nehru) went up and stood on a mound of Mohenjodaro to feel the past in his bones, came to Saranath to hear the echoes of Buddha's Fire Sermon, went to Fatehpur Sikri to learn that an Emperor invited learned men of all faiths and himself joined them in discussions . . . read the hymns of the Rigveda which apostrophized the gods, turned to the Upanishads which contained a hard cerebral core in dialogue and discussion . . . And India began to flow in his veins.

In another essay, he describes 'the Indian view' in these words: The essential Greek view of tragedy, namely, "Sin brings Suffering and suffering brings wisdom" must be nearer the Indian view than the Anglo-saxon, born of enthronement of, or over-attention to, the self.

Sakuntala suffers more than she deserves. So does Sita, as do the Pandavas, Nala, Harishandra. But the Indian would say it chastens them. There is in their conduct both heroism and a touch of the saint. The poet's concern seems to be the schooling of the soul, not pity or fear. Such Indian sensibility, with its awareness of India's hoary past and its enduring rich tradition, coupled with the view that 'Ripeness is all' (as Shakespeare would say) should mould a work if it has to be called a 'great Indian work,' according to CDN. Hence CDN's seemingly hasty rejection of Naipaul, Ezekiel, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and many other such writers who, according to him, do not have Indian sensibility; who, as he says in a different context, "suffer from loss of touch with the vital past of India" ¹⁰ Also, he has little sympathy for any attempt at decentering Indian tradition and culture, and such an attempt provokes from him a violent, occasionally virulent, response.

Regarding CDN's formulation of 'Indian Sensibility' and his use of it as a 'touchstone of Indian literature,' two points need to be made. The first one is Raja Rao's influence on this formulation. Beginning with *The Serpent And The Rope*, Raja Rao became a champion of Indian (strictly speaking Vedic / Brahminic) culture and philosophy – almost a literary avatar of the 8th-century philosopher-poet, Shankaracharya. The point is, it was, coincidentally, during this period that Raja Rao and CDN became very close, developing a sort of spiritual kinship. Hence, in most of the writings of CDN during the 80s and 90s of the last century, we find the influence of Raja Rao – love and respect for Sanskrit and Upanishads, use of concepts and technical terms developed by Sanskrit rhetoricians, and, of course, his formulation of 'Indian

Sensibility.' To reinforce this argument, we can juxtapose the earlier quoted 'Nehru passage' of CDN with this from *The Serpent And the Rope*: (India is a country) where the past and the present are forever knit into one whole experience . . . Going down the Ganges, who could not imagine the Compassionate One Himself coming down the foot path, by the Sarayu, to wash the mendicant bowl.

Or, consider these statements of Raja Rao / Ramaswamy: "Truth is the Himalayas and Ganges of Humanity" (p. 35). In one of the interviews, Raja Rao is reported as saying: "Nowadays, I am obsessed with Sanskrit. . . ."

If you possess the knowledge of Sanskrit, you possess the knowledge of yourself."

CDN considered Raja Rao as the pinnacle of creativity because of his rich Indian Sensibility. In his essay "Shakespeare And Indian Sensibility," CDN compares Raja Rao's vision with that of Shakespeare and says: Now comes the crucial speech of Govindan Nair (in *Cat And Shakespeare*) juxtaposing Shakespeare's world-view with ours, the Western and the Eastern, the moral and the metaphysical, the male-dominated and the Feminine centered. Raja Rao perceives the world of Shakespeare with amazing incisiveness and seems to find it wanting. He probes by means of details the contrast between the world of Shakespeare and his own, not as 'philosophical thinking' but as 'spiritual seeing,' . . . (The Function, p. 67)

The second point is that CDN's formulation of 'Indian Sensibility' (or Raja Rao's 'Indian Culture') appears to be very similar to Eliot's formulation of the great European 'Tradition' and both invite similar charges. 12 Surely, it can be argued that there is not one Indian tradition, and that there are only Indian traditions. Consequently, the terms 'Indianness' and 'Indian Sensibility' (like Eliot's 'European tradition' or Leavis's 'Englishness') can be charged as being vague and hegemonic – what the post-modernists would call a 'mega narrative.'

However, both CDN and Raja Rao (as Eliot and Leavis) firmly and sincerely believed in the existence of such a tradition; and that is that. It is for us to see if such a formulation helped or hindered their critical / creative faculties.

Finally, it appears to me, that at the back of CDN's distrust of Theory, his formulation of Indian Sensibility, and his ambition to revive and reactivate ancient Sanskrit poetics, there lies the pressure of 'cultural identity,' one of the corollaries of colonialism. His desire (or a passionate hunger) to go back to his roots and preserve them is best exemplified in these rueful words:

We in this country have in the recent years achieved different Degrees of self-reliance even in Science and Technology, to the extent that we can today talk of Indian Science, but in so intimate a matter as responding to a work of art, our judgments are not our own. They are those of T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, L. C. Knights,

Frank Kermode, R. P. Blackmur or Lionel Trilling. And it is widely Acknowledged that in eating and Love-making no one can do it for you..

But the question of 'roots' in intellectual / cultural fields is maddeningly confusing. Beginning with Nietzsche in Italy, the philosophy of Deconstruction goes to Derrida in France and then through him flowers in America. However, it can be argued that originally, its roots are in the 'Apoha Theory' of Buddhist philosophers, who extensively developed it during 4 th and 6 th centuries, A. D., in India. 14 (In fact, Derrida had acknowledged as far back as 1971 that the

philosophical tradition he inherited was “ Indo-European.”) Similarly, the famous modern British Formalist, William Empson, states in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that most of his ideas, coming from German tradition, are originally Indian in origin, particularly of Buddhist thinkers. 15 In this situation, which are 'our' roots?

Cultural and literary peregrinations, it appears, are too knotty and convoluted for us to map their routes and assuage our identity aspirations.

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