

Sahitya Akademi Fellowship

1985

Acceptance Speech by Sri K.R. Srinivasa Iyanger

Mr. President, Members of the Sahitya Akademi, Fellow-writers, Ladies and Gentlemen:

That the Sahitya Akademi, our National Academy of Letters, should have elected me as one of the three new Fellows is an honour extraordinary, un hoped-for and unexpected. And the honour is doubled with delight, since I receive the Fellowship plaque at the hands of Prof. Gokak the Akademi's President and my friend of forty years. We have served in Colleges affiliated to the Bombay University, we have had common interests, and we have grown in the fellowship of faith in the Aurobindonian Vision of India's and humanity's future destiny. Prof. Gokak's has been a sustained ministry as teacher and man of letters, and his massive epic, *Bharat Sindhu Rashmi*, marks the culmination and fusion of these two lines of ascent of consciousness and the resulting fulfilment.

It is an equally gratifying circumstance that I receive the Fellowship plaque along with my esteemed friends, Sri Shivaram Karanth and Dr. Umashankar Joshi. During my 14-year stay in North Karnataka, I used to hear a good deal about Sri Karanth from my colleagues at Belgaum, Prof. S.S. Basawana and Dr. S.C. Nandimath. But of course it was his *Marali Mannige*—which my wife had read in the original, though I had to rely on an English translation—that first bounced me, and has since kept me captive to Sri Karanth's mastery of the art of fiction. *Marali Mannige* is a prose epic on "dear dogged humanity", a classic of everyday life in South India. Again, I read last year Sri Karanth's novelettes, *The Shrine* and *Choma's Drum*, and admired his compassionate delineation of Indian womanhood more sinned against than sinning, and weighted with the unrelieved burden of sufferance. While Choma—like Oskar in Gunter Grass's novel—drums his way through life, it is Belli the woman who pays the wages of the man's sin. It is over half a century since *Chomana Dudi* appeared, yet the Bellis are around all the time, hapless victims of violence and heroines of unabating tragedy.

As for Umashankarji, our friendship was forged during a flight 28 years ago in an Air India superconstellation racing 20,000 feet above the ground from Calcutta to Tokyo. We were delegates to the P.E.N. Congress, and Prof. Gokak was with us too. That was the flight, I think, that inspired 'Vinayaka' to indite *Dhyava Prithvi*, the poem that won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1960. Like Sri Karanth who became a freedom-fighter in Gandhiji's first non-cooperation movement in the early twenties, Umashankar jumped into the political fray in the early thirties. If Sri Karanth scores as the sensitive portraitist of the human predicament which is fatality leavened by Grace, Umashankar is the lyric poet in excelsis. Once I was intently listening to Kulapati K.M. Munshi at his Juhu residence while he was expatiating on 20th century trends in Gujarati literature. When it came to Umashankar, Sri Munshi stopped for a few seconds, and continued: "It's impossible to assess his poetry—it's too elusive, too full of the subtle play of dancing lights, too deeply resonant of intangible realities." When freedom came fractured as it were and sullenly twy-faced, there was no cheer in Umashankar's heart. And he felt fragmented, *chinna binna chun!* And today, although he has registered impressive achievement in letters, as also leadership in education and academic administration, there is the twitch of agony because of recent happenings in the country. But writers like Karanth and Joshi are still the essential 14-carat gold backing for the frayed devalued currency of our times.

I feel honoured and trebly so, for the present linking with Sri Karanth and Umashankarji means for me a catalytic charge of enrichment, which evokes a surge of gratitude and humility.

I may also recall how, during my term as Vice-President and as desired by the President, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, I was privileged to present the Fellowship plaque to Sri D.R. Bendre at Dharwar, Sri Visvanatha Satyanarayana at Hyderabad, Sri Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer at Kozhikode, Sri Masti Venkatesa Iyengar at Bangalore and Sri T.P. Minakshisundaran at Madras. Bendre's lyrics often aglow with the higher lights; Satyanarayana's *Srimad Ramayana Kalpavrikshamu* with its reverberent epic spans; Basheer's shorter fiction a class by

itself; versatile Masti holding aloft his *atma dipa* for all the stragglers in the dark; and Minakshisundaran the seasoned scholar and critic, educationist and humanist: what rare good fortune that I should have been chosen to present to these outstanding men of letters the insignia of the immortality of the Akademi Fellowship! And there are twenty more in the Scroll of Honour—Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Rajaji, Sumitranandan Pant, and others worthily representative of the manifold munificence of modern Indian literature, some happily living, and the rest challengingly alive in the imperishable work they have left behind.

Frankly, it hardly ever occurred to me that, as if in a fit of absence of mind, I too would one day be admitted or pushed into the exclusive Mandala. I am basically a prosaic journeyman of letters, and I write in alien uncomfortable English, not in my home-language, Tamil. I have in the main cultivated literary history and criticism, especially in the field of Indian writing in English, and the Sahitya Akademi award was for my biography of the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It is only during the last 10 years that I have turned to verse, whether for translation (from Sanskrit and Tamil) or for rumination and self-probing. My latest effort, however, is *Sitayana*, an attempt to render in verse Sita's saga sublime, *Sitayah charitam mahat*. In this situation, I look upon the conferment of the Fellowship as a fair omen, a gracious benediction by the Akademi which is indeed the corporate power and personality of the play of Vak, the power Divine and the evolving personality that, since the time of the Vedic singers three or four thousand years ago and through all the intervening centuries, has helped to make Indian literature, Bharatiya Sahitya—in its cumulation and splendid articulation and defying obsolescence and oblivion,—the richest, and the most wide-ranging, enduring and rewarding.

A nation, like a human being, is a concert of concentric sheaths, and behind the physical, vital and cerebral—the chemical, electric and mental—there is the luminous glow of integral knowledge, and deeper yet, the still centre of the mystical tremendum of Truth-Love-Beauty. And all five kosas need appropriate nourishment. A great deal may be within the competence of our gymnasiums, our computerised and robotised Establishments, our Senates and Parliaments, our Universities and Academies. All must nevertheless fall short of the power of the WORD (or aggregate WORD) of the creative writer in his finest moments, the WORD that confers poignancy and permanence on what Sri Aurobindo has called "the beauty and delight of the thousand-coloured, many-crested, and million-waved miracle of life", the WORD that is like a winged squadron of the Spirit and is the "fortifier and builder" of the evolving human soul towards its far goals, the WORD that annuls all excrescent difference and division and distress, and dowers us with the sovereignty of the triune Ananda. Devi Sita's *amritam visha samsrishtam* (it's nectar, it's poison too) or *Na kaschit naparadhyati* (Is there any, any, who hasn't done a wrong?) is the kind of incandescent utterance that at once redeems the infected time and ordains a calm lucidity. And it is in indubitable works of literature that suddenly, providentially, we come upon such emanations of Vak, such instant dispellers of darkness, such radiant intimations of deathlessness. May our writers of today and tomorrow, like their great forbears reaching back to the Seers and Bards of Vedic antiquity, and evading the diverse 'enemies of promise' lurking around, uphold their elected vocation, their unique sacerdocy, and prove votaries of Truth and Beauty, and transmitters of Hope and Grace. To be a writer in India today is to try through severe askesis, the arduous discipline of life, thought, feeling and language, and each to the measure of his or her capacity, to be worthy of this vocation second to no other, and this again calls for endless faith and humility.

I thank the Sahitya Akademi, both for my long years of past association as Vice-President which won for me the priceless friendship of writers from all over the country, and now for the termless consanguinity of Fellowship so generously bestowed upon me.

And Fellow-writers and Friends, I thank you for the receptive hearing you have given me.