



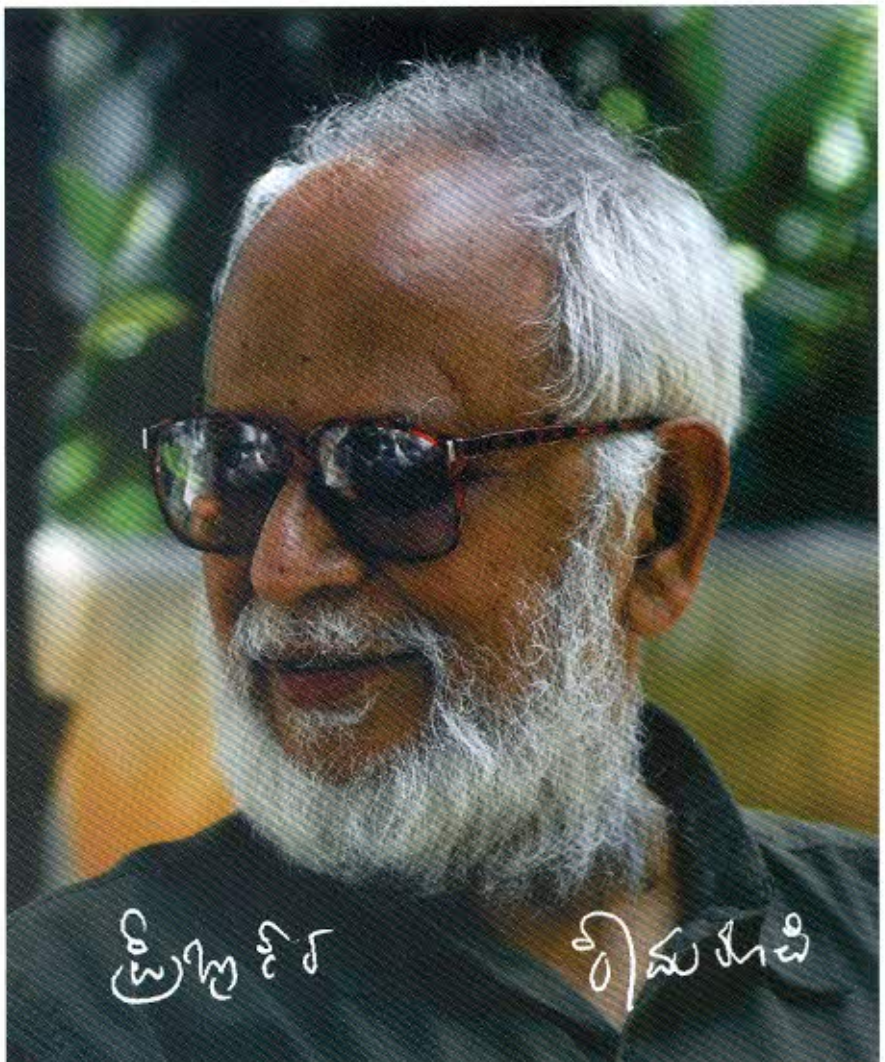
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meet the author

M. S. Prabhakara (Kamaroopi)





M.S. Prabhakara, better known by his pen-name **Kamaroopi** in Kannada literary circles shot into prominence in 1969 when his short story collection *Ondu tola punugu mattu itara kategalu* was published by Manohara grantha male, Dharwad. "Prabhakara's pen-name too betrays the Assamese connection. **Kamaroopi** was the ancient name of Assam and was known as the land of sorcerers. Prabhakara would insist that he is a *Kamarupiya*, a person from Lower Assam who is typically unsophisticated and blunt compared to those bred in Upper Assam. Guwahati, where he has a home is also in today's Kamarup District. But beyond its significance as a place noun, 'Kamrup' would mean 'the shape of one's choice.'" (Sugata Srinivasaraju).

During those days young writers U.R. Anantha Murthy, P. Lankesh, Chandrasekhara Kambara, Chitthala brothers, Shanthinatha Desai, Sankara

Mokasi Punekara, Nisar Ahmed and others were enriching Modern Kannada Literary movement through their unorthodox and novel method of writings under the doyen leadership of M. Gopalakrishna Adiga, a towering personality. All of a sudden, two new and peculiar voices were noticed amidst this volatile and vibrant literary environment and those were of A.K. Ramanujan and 'Kamaroopi'. They were entirely different in that context from above mentioned writers. While A.K. Ramanujan was at distant Chicago in USA, Prabhakara was at Guwahati, in the north-eastern part of the country. While both were different from other Kannada co-writers of that era, between them too they were entirely different. While Ramanujan wrote abundantly Prabhakara wrote little. Prabhakara wrote three books between 1969 and 1981 which are all fiction and altogether run into about 265 pages to be exact. *Sanchaya*, Bangalore, is bringing out the Collected edition of his Kannada writings (Samagra Sahitya). [They are *Ondu tola punugu mattu itara kategalu* (1969), *Kuduremotte* (1974) and *Anjikinayatakayya* (1981)]. After 27 years he published a collection of essays in English, *Words and Ideas*. A new book about Identity and Insurgency in North East India in English *Looking Back into the Future* has been published by Routledge. This shows his healthy restraint. The quality of his writings and the content and form attracted a new section of readers and critics. Though they were neither vibrant nor volatile like other modern



With Pu Lalthanhawla, Chief Minister, Mizoram in Aizawl.

Kannada writings they definitely had a noticeable, silent, qualitative effect and impact on a section of the new generation, which felt they were unique.

"Motnahalli Surappa Prabhakara would be his full expanded name. Motnahalli is a tiny village 12 kms from Kolar and that is the place from where his ancestors hailed. Surappa was his father. Once in the 1960s, when he was referring to the 1951 census at the Guwahati University library, amidst all the data compiled he was surprised to see a mention of Motnahalli, which he had never visited. Against the name of the village the census detail said 'bechirag.' Prabhakara did not really know what that meant, so he looked it up in the Kittel's dictionary and found that it was an 'abandoned' place. A place where no fire was lit. He later connected this fact, discovered many miles away from home, with what he had heard as a little boy. The village had been apparently abandoned by all its residents due to some tragic incident.. The next time he visited Kolar he cycled down to the village and found that the story of the tragic incident to be correct. Discovering the truth about his ancestral village while sitting in Guwahati makes all his identities look so intertwined.

The more you hear his stories, the more it becomes clear that he was never meant to belong to just the place he was born or brought up. This statement brings back to my mind an image from the evening when Prabhakara quite literally put on the many caps and head scarfs he had collected during his travels over the years. Among the many that he put on, there was the Palestinian keffiyeh, made so famous by Yaseer Arafat; there was the red head band of the Burmese student movement; a Nepali cap, African caps and of course the cap of the African National Congress." (Sugata Srinivasaraju)

Prabhakara graduated from Central College, Bangalore with an honours and masters degree in English language and literature(1953-57), and secured a Doctorate degree from Karnataka University. After brief stints as an English teacher in National College, Bangalore and Karnataka College, Dharwad, he joined Guwahati University in February 1962 where he stayed for nearly fourteen years. He gave up teaching in December 1975,



In Kaziranga National Park with Prof. Ranjit Deka

went to Bombay to join the Economic and Political weekly as a member of its editorial staff. He returned to Guwahati in 1983 as the special correspondent of The Hindu and later of Frontline, covering Assam and neighbouring areas in north-east India. He went to South Africa in June 1994 as the Southern Africa correspondent of these publications. He returned to his ancestral house in Kolar, Karnataka, in March 2010.

His novel, *Kuduremotte*, was among the thirty six books chosen for an award by the Karnataka Sahitya Academy in 1976. The novel was also among one hundred books selected by the department of Kannada and Culture, Government of Karnataka, for inclusion in the *Suvarna Grantha Male*, making the fiftieth anniversary of the formation of a unified Karnataka state.

In this novel *Kuduremotte* Prabhakara gives the genealogy and lineage, details of days and dates connected with different characters of the novel which is in a way necessary for the understanding of the novel. His works stand separately while analysing modern Kannada fiction.

"Prabhakara, during the major part of his professional career stayed far away from Karnataka. He has never hesitated to call a spade a spade. Though he is shy by nature, he is also frank and never hesitated to tell the truth. This can be seen in all his writings, whether in Kannada or in

English. Strange, different and unique is his narration, the subject matter of his fiction always revolves around alienation and loneliness." One can see the hard realities of life in his writings such as in *Bolimaganu katha*. There are seven stories in *Ondu tola punugu mattu itara katha*. One can only wonder about the perfect fusion of content and form in this work of art. The writers' attitude towards life is entirely different. For example a story *Sahitya, Soundarya* reveals that it is very difficult to understand the complexities of life.

Prasanna, an eminent theatre person classifies Prabhakara with the likes of A.K. Ramanujan, Raghavendra Khasaneesa and Kusumakara Devaragannuru in contrast with U.R. Anantha Murthy, P. Lankesh and Shanthinatha Desai. He categorises Prabhakara group as radical modernists. He elaborates "They were radical in the sense that their existential loneliness was thick and complete. While the others, with the exception of Gopalakrishna Adiga, probably, did not uproot themselves so completely nor were they so bleak in their attitude towards life. The other common factor these writers have is their rather small output. After the initial spurt of enthusiasm they almost completely stopped writing, as if unable to bear the burden of their own pessimism. Raghavendra Khasaneesa, an excellent short story writer, for example, has written only half a dozen short stories. Prabhakara completely vanished from the scene after the sixties decade for

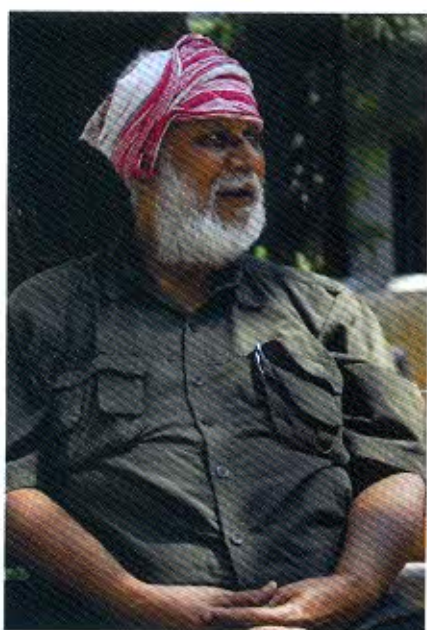
nearly four decades. His silence during these four decades is so complete that entire generations of Kannadigas have not even heard his name, except as a rare reference in books of literary criticism. But Prabhakara was active elsewhere."

Prasanna elaborates further "Prabhakara has lead a full life, albeit a double life. He spent the best part of these four decades in the North eastern parts of India, first as an English teacher at Guwahati university, and then as a distinguished Journalist specializing in the affairs of the north east. Today Prabhakara is considered an authority on North eastern affairs, Prabhakara has worked as a correspondent for renowned Journals and news papers such as Economic and Political Weekly, Frontline and Hindu. His work as a Foreign Correspondent in South Africa, during and after its independence, has become legendary. He became the first Indian journalist to interview Nelson Mandela.

Prabhakara has a deep rooted commitment to the leftist ideology and to the down trodden. He enjoys varied interests; plays chess, listens to music and reads widely. While living in Bombay, come Sunday, Prabhakara used go to Dadabhai Naoroji Road to play chess with a pavement book seller trading in the arcade in front of Thomas Cook. His taste for good books is phenomenal. It spread over varied disciplines and literary genres. He has a wonderful collection of popular crime writing for example. Prabhakara is well conversant with the Assamese



With Dr. Bhupen Hazarika in Guwahati.



With a Gamocha wrapped round his head

language which he speaks with fair fluency. Thus what Kannada literature lost has become a gain for the rest of the country."

About his journalism Sugata Srinivasaraju writes "After a seven-year stint at EPW he returned to Guwahati in 1983 as the Hindu's special correspondent. With his literary and research backgrounds, he became a member of that rare breed of scholar-journalists in our country. Prabhakara's writings in the EPW and The Hindu lie scattered and uncollected, which is a pity for they deserve their true value and place in history.

It is very rare that a journalist allows a complete transformation of his identity and acquires a new self to sincerely report a society, its people and their struggles. Prabhakara's reportage from Assam and South Africa was undoubtedly in this mould. It is one thing to pick up an American accent on a posting to Washington and another thing to be completely seeped in the culture, traditions and everyday life of the people while reporting from forgotten lands. The latter demands extraordinary commitment and creativity. In pursuance of that pompous idea of 'objectivity', a journalist most often tries to remain an 'outsider' to what he is reporting, but in the case of Prabhakara's journalism the distances are bridged so as to not compromise truth and also fairly reflect the cosmology of thinking of those being represented.

One has to clearly make a difference between journalists getting involved in a cultural or social situation with a singular motive of scooping a story and those who get involved to experience the humanity of the people they are reporting. Those who are there for a scoop exit as quickly as they enter, but in the case of Prabhakara he not only writes to experience that humanity, but has also allowed that humanity to transform him. The transformation is so complete that now at 75 he feels he is less and less of a Kannadiga but more an Assamese or a South African. Usually it works the other way round. Wherever they go, people try to retain their identity or carry their linguistic and cultural baggage, but it requires enormous courage to allow it a substratum life".

"But even before we speak of the transformation and reshaping with finality, let's focus on what I see as a new problem that confronts Prabhakara. This, interestingly, has come about after he decided to spend one half of the year in Guwahati and the other in Bangalore following his retirement from the Hindu. I wonder if what was in the substratum is slowly foregrounding itself. I am not sure if his staying in Bangalore is about recovering a bit of his roots, but he has certainly gotten back to writing in Kannada. It appears that he has started re-accommodating his Kannada identity. The other day he read out a poem that he had written after many decades in Kannada called *Tuppa* (ghee), which described the ritual bathing of his grandfather in Kataripalya of Kolar where he grew up. He states in the poem that he dislikes ghee but remembers that as a child he was completely fascinated by accounts of how his grandfather smeared the ghee all over his body before an elaborate session with near-boiling water in the bathroom.

Dr. C.N. Ramachandran, eminent critic opines about Prabhakara's *Kuduremotte* in his *Kathanashastra* as follows: "From the point of view of 'multiple narrators', *Kuduremotte* (*Horse's Egg / Mare's Nest-1974*), by Prabhakara is a remarkable novella. There are four narrators; three of them narrate the story of the same family (that of a wealthy landlord and his decline) in first person; the last one is a short parable in third person.

The story is of a Brahmin landlord, once very rich. When the novella opens, that landlord (Ramaswamaiah) is dead and his family has lost all its land and wealth; one tenant farmer who worked for the landlord possesses now all his master's land. The first three narrators are: Vatyappa the former tenant farmer, Chandrashekhara his son, Savitri and Shankarayya the children of the landlord now dead. Each

one of them gives a different set of reasons for the decline of the landlord's family and rise of the tenant farmer.

Through such use of multiple narrators, the novelist establishes two major ontological points: History (both social and political) is a 'construct' of the past, shaped by the present's needs and constraints; secondly, Truth cannot be perceived in full; all that one is capable of getting is only a 'half truth.'

CHRONOLOGY

- 1936 May : Born
 1953-57 : B.A. (Hons); M.A, English, at Central College, Bangalore
 1964 : Ph.D., from Karnataka University, Dissertation on George Orwell
 1957-62 : Lecturer in English, National College, Basavanagudi, Bangalore; Karnataka College, Dharwad
 1962-75 : Lecturer and Reader in English, Gauhati University
 1969 : *Ondu tola punugu mattu ithara kategalu*
 1974 : *Kuduremotte*
 1975-83 : Editorial staff; Economic and Political Weekly, Mumbai
 1976 : Karnataka Rajya Sahitya Academy Award, *Kuduremotte*
 1981 : *Anjikinyatakayya*
 1983-94 : Special Correspondent, The Hindu and Frontline, in Northeast India, stationed at Guwahati
 1994-2002 : Special Correspondent, The Hindu and Frontline, South Africa, stationed at Johannesburg and Cape Town
 2002 : Return to Guwahati, Retirement
 2006 : *Kuduremotte* Published in Suvarna Granthamale Department of Kannada and Culture, Govt. of Karnataka
 2007 : *Words and Ideas*, Anwasha, Guwahati
 2010 : Return to Kolar
 2011 : *Looking Back into the Future: Identity and Insurgency in Northeast India*, Routledge, Delhi.

* Excerpts from Sri Sugata Srinivasaraju : Courtesy OUTLOOK

* Photographs (Front & with Assamese gamocha) : Sri Nilotpal Baruah, OUTLOOK



In Dibru - Saikhowa Wild Life Sanctuary with Dr. Aparna Mahanta and Dr. Parama Mahanta and other friends.