APPENDIX

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR U.R.ANANTHAMURTHY CONDUCTED ON 18 MAY 2012 AT HIS RESIDENCE IN BANGALORE

Researcher: Good morning Sir. At the outset, thank you so much for allowing us to have this interview with you. While we have a lot of questions, your health is also very much our concern.

U R Ananthamurthy: Thank you.

Researcher: We would like to have your views about modernity in the Indian context. How do Indian societies negotiate with modernity?

URA: I have some kind of a theory on modernity which I spoke of when I was the President of the Kannada SahityaSammelan in Tumkur a few years ago. My theory was that in the 20th century, there are three great ‘hungers’. I call them ‘hungers’. One is the hunger for modernity, the other hunger is for equality and the third hunger is for spirituality. I said that the basic hunger is the hunger for equality in the 20th century. Look at the greatest of men, you know - Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or anyone. First of all the hunger for equality - this hunger is for self dignity and equality. That was the greatest movement in the 20th century. And where does it come from? In the desire for modernity, to move away from your traditions, leaving everything, taking what is good and leaving what is bad - a kind of critical sensibility about your own past. Not continuation, but choosing what is right for you. And the third I said is the hunger for spirituality. What I meant was the great people who were a little tired of organized religion. Great thinkers in the west began to move out of the Christian church, but in search of God. That is very important.
Researcher: Outside the church?

URA: Yes, outside the church. And the greatest of the Hindus went out of their organized religion. Whether it is Ramakrishna Paramahamsa or Ramanamahirishi, take any of them. J. Krishnamurthy, in our own times. They all moved out of organized religion in search of spirituality. So equality, modernity and spirituality went together but there is a very great balance to be maintained between these, because if modernity does not have as a component of that desire, equality and spirituality, it becomes what it is now, globalised, search for luxury and a destroyed earth. So there is a danger in every one of these. Spirituality can also create false gurus everywhere. Equality can also produce politicians without any responsibility. Equality degenerates into populism, spirituality into false gurus. Everything can go wrong. So our great writers like Tagore, Premchand and ShivramaKaranth in my own language held all these three desires without one destroying the other and hence my definition - modernity is this new hunger in all these countries, for what I call equality at a social, cultural level.

Researcher: Were you able to negotiate all the three in a balanced manner?

URA: Yes.

Researcher: But we have Sangam literature focusing on self esteem, human dignity and then down the line we had Basavanna who fought for equality. So we’ve had a tradition to account for this equality.

URA: You’re very correct. And all those who are in search of modernity and equality choose what they like in their tradition. I have a word for them. I call them ‘critical insiders’. They are insiders but they are critical. Basavanna is an insider but he is critical. Gandhi is an insider but he is critical.

Researcher: Do you add Tagore also in that?
URA: Yes, yes.

Researcher: But Tagore and Gandhi always had differences.

URA: Oh they had differences about modernity, whether this…

Researcher: Tagore’s modernity incorporated all the alien influences but Gandhi was stubborn in accommodating them.

URA: Yes, but Gandhi chose Nehru and not Patel. So, Gandhi also had ambivalence about this.

Researcher: This ambivalence has a tradition? No one can escape from that, not even Prof Ananthamurthy?

URA: (Laughs) No, I am full of that. That’s why I am a writer.

Researcher: But then, the ambivalence that is found in pre Bharatipura days and post Bharatipura days that Dr. Ganesh points out?

URA: I know. I am going through a struggle in myself, you know. I mean if any civilization loses the memory of its own past, it ceases to be civilization. There is a need for a continuity of memory. And for the continuity of memory, all those things which you were very critical of, have also played a part in the continuity of memory. And hence you take what you want and you leave what you don’t want. There is a very famous story which always moves me. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to know whether the Vedas approved of untouchability, whether there’s sanction for untouchability. So he went to the great Benares pundits. They examined all the Vedas and they said, “No, there is no place for untouchability of the kind we practice. But Gandhi wanted to be convinced further. He came to the best scholar in Maharashtra. He lived to be a hundred years. He was a very great scholar. He had written it in his own autobiography. When he was asked, he said, “You can choose some portions in the Vedas to prove that untouchability is approved.”
Then Gandhi said in a simple way, “I will reject them”. So he will reject them when he thinks it doesn’t suit a certain human code. That is my view. One should not uphold tradition for the sake of upholding it. If it is wrong, it is wrong.

**Researcher:** In the first place why does he want to know whether vedic sanction was there for untouchability or not. As a right thinking person, he can reject untouchability without any sanction.

**URA:** That is also my view. If you can get the whole masses on your side then you will not be alone in your advocacy of what is modernity… You know, I did this myself and got into a controversy. There is a seer of a mutt, in Udipi, Pejawar mutt. In his 50th year, he suddenly decided to enter the harijan colonies. He went into harijan colonies and then I wrote him a letter.”I am very happy you have done it. I have great respect for your gesture.” I also wrote, “I can’t convince my mother about untouchability but if you go I can tell her, Pejavar mutt seer has also gone, so there is no religious difference, so you can accept it”. When great icons of tradition change a little, much more changes happen at the social level and at the level of civilization. I’m always aware of what the conservatives think about it because from their point of view there is a slight change. For instance Rajagopalacharya was steadily and sturdily on the side of the fight against untouchability, and that helped in the South a great deal, in taking the tradition with it. That’s why Gandhi wanted to know if the vedas would approve of it. But Gandhi was very clear. If vedas advocated untouchability, he would oppose the vedas.

**Researcher:** Oh, he was prepared? But his faith in *varnashrama* is being criticized.
URA: He said it was different from *jathi*. They make a difference between *varnashrama* and *jathi*. Even Ambedkar made this difference between *varnashrama* and *jathi*. In *varnasharma*, there is some room for upward mobilization. All our kings were shudras in the past.

Researcher: Kshatriyas?

URA: What is Kshatriya? It is an affiliating category. You know, in those days we had a University which would affiliate a college. So this Kshatriya was an affiliating category and anyone who rose in power would become a Kshatriya, like Shivaji who became a Kshatriya. And I think Chandragupta became a Kshatriya. Nobody became a Brahmin. But Vishvamitra became a Brahmin in the past. In *varnasharma* there was room for change of words but *jathi* is a fixed thing. Now unless you make a difference between *varnashrama* and *jathi*, you will always be confused about it. I had a friend in America who used to say “Every society has *varnashrama*. Take Soviet society. The party members and the managerial class were higher and the working class was considered to be lower. So some *varnashrama* was seen.

Researcher: But in prosperous societies it is not as visible as in countries like India.

URA: No, no, in prosperous countries it is more in motion. People rise. In societies which are not prosperous, they don’t rise. So *varnasharma* begins to change in a prosperous society whereas *jathi* doesn’t change even in a prosperous society. Now, you know India has *jathi*. So you get married in *jathi*. You die in your *jathi*. Every *jathi* has its own name, its own respect and its own hierarchy. And what is difficult in India is how to fight *jathi*. But you know I have another difficulty. I want all our pluralities to be preserved. One of the preservers of plurality is *jathi*. You have your own system of
eating, your own system of dressing, your own system of marrying, everything. All pluralities depend on \textit{jathi} but you want \textit{jathi} to go, pluralities not to go.

\textbf{Researcher:} That hybridization, how do you expect it to happen?

\textbf{URA:} I don’t know. This is what is to be watched. Can we keep our pluralities and give up \textit{jathi} and not get homogenized like Americans?

\textbf{Researcher:} We feel it now; we see it in Universities like ours. The fact that we organize so many programmes, to tell them (the students), to convince them that there is a plurality, and that our greatness lies in plurality. This generation doesn’t have the mind (to accept that). The homogenization takes place at the school, at the LKG level itself.

\textbf{URA:} And hence some of my friends in my younger days used to argue, “Your \textit{jathi} will not go unless there is urbanization. And there is a higher kind of urbanization now.

\textbf{Researcher:} But then it goes to a completely different route with higher urbanization.

\textbf{URA:} And then you know, you have the same problem as that of Eliot and Yeats who thought that the great awakening of knowledge that they all celebrated had also brought about ignorance of a different kind. A sense of community had gone after that awakening. And hence people like Eliot and others became conservative in a way. A kind of radical conservatism. So in India there is a kind of a left which is not bothered about these questions and a kind of a right which is not bothered about these questions. And certain people who want to preserve pluralities but who don’t want caste hierarchies, who want all the languages to be preserved, who don’t want homogenization, who don’t want an American way of life and who don’t want to give up Indian way of life. They are people who are always caught in contradictions.

\textbf{Researcher:} You include Lohia also in that? Where did he go wrong?
URA: He thought that the lower castes, if they came together, would create a parallel civilization, an alternative one. And they did. They became like Brahmins. I had shared this with Dr. Lohia. “What happens you know when lower caste people begin to imitate the upper caste people?” and he just smiled. He realized it but he said, “History has to be set in motion.” In India History is not moving at all and hence whatever theories that you make are theories you make in a society which is not changing. One big problem between Lohia and Gandhi was belief in God. Gandhi loved Lohia but he also said “I don’t trust people who don’t believe in God.” Lohia said, “I may not believe in God but Gandhi was Godlike for me.”

Researcher: You were a pioneer in criticizing the caste system from an upper caste Brahmin point of view but the caste hierarchy that is seen between shudras and untouchables is more severe and more violent but that never got documented in Indian literature, at least not as effectively as it is seen in your own.

URA: You are very right. I have felt the great need for it. Among my socialist friends, one who first realized it was Madhu Limaye. Once in Mysore he told me, “You talk of landlords versus peasants but a landlord has to spend a lot of money to come to town if his child falls sick to get the doctor’s help. He has to spend a lot of money to educate his son. But a bank worker can get all these benefits with a smaller salary. We socialists have not yet realized this”. Lohia knew that the Brahmins’ claim to knowledge and power was accepted as final truths by all the castes. He said once that if you have knowledge of English, a Brahmin caste and wealth, you come to power. If you have any of these two, you will gain the third. He knew the power mechanics of India and he wanted to break it. He broke it but then he brought in something much worse, the domination of the middle
caste. Now it is happening in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. India is in a fluid state now. Not in the right state of abolishing castes, but in a state of confusion from which one hopes that some sanity will emerge for which caste should reach the lowest limits. It is the Hegelian dialecticism. In *Samskara* I have used a lot of Hegelian dialectics, in my construction of the novel.

**Researcher:** But looks like you have seen characters in black and white in *Samskara*; you’ve made Naranappa a saint, Praneshacharya and other Brahmin characters, villains. And there is a strong similarity between Camus’ *The Plague* and *Samskara*. Have you drawn very richly from that?

**URA:** Absolutely not. I have not read The Plague. I read his book where the man kills an Arab.

**Researcher:** Mersault, *The Outsider*.

**URA:** Right, But I had some relation with Bergman’s film Seventh Seal. Seventh Seal in a very remote way created the possibility of a Praneshacharya and a Putta for me. And Erikson was surprised that the parallel he drew was very different from mine.

**Researcher:** But it is surprising that in *The Plague*, the main characters are able to sort the problem of the plague itself, the rats. How is it that nobody can think of solving that problem in *Samskara*?

**URA:** They don’t even know it’s the plague. There is a certain kind of a rural ignorance. Like everywhere. My father was an educated man and he lived in my *agrahara*. So I know. And I had written a story when I was young. The doctors who came to inoculate didn’t go to the Dalit area.

**Researcher:** That is the reason why many people began to die?
URA: Yes, they began to die. So there was awareness and ignorance. When you write a realistic novel, you begin to treat the way you analyze but when you write an allegorical novel, you take such leaps. That is why Naranappa dies saying ‘Narayana’. And there was a Naranappa hidden in Praneshacharya. And then after meeting Chandri, he goes through every experience of Naranappa. So he becomes Naranappa himself. I know what shraddha is. Actually in ashraddha if you burn a man, then it is incumbent on you to do a shraddha to make the prethawho has been burnt into a pitru. Change into a pitru. And hence you have to put some milk everyday and a little thread as it is believed that the pretha will come and take it. From the seventh day, the son will begin to do the shraddha where the knees, and the genitals and the heart, the body of the man is recreated. recreated everyday through these rituals. I think on the twelfth day, you say, “gachcha gachchapretha”, which means “go away, pretha, go away” and the pretharisises. And then there is a little rice for the pretha, a little rice for the pitru and the pretha’s rice is mixed with the pitru’s.

Researcher: Pinda?

URA: Yes, Pinda. I have used the great symbolism in my novel which Brahmins also didn’t see. Praneshacharya when he goes on a journey is doing everything that Naranappa has done. So in a way he is psychologically involved in the character whom he tried to judge. Now he knows that he can’t judge him because he is a bit of Naranappa himself. Not only that. There was a Naranappa whom he encountered when he was very young.

Researcher: Mahabala?

URA: Mahabala, so there is that kind of continuity. So I have a structure of a novel which is very different from realistic novels. I’m not an author who says I know the
answers for the novel that I write. No, not an all knowing author.

**Researcher:** Why is it that in *Samskara*, Brahmin women are painted in such a contrast to the low caste women?

**URA:** I think I overdid it. You know when you do a novel like that, sometimes it happens. Some lines are overdrawn. People think that Chandri is an untouchable woman. No, she is half Brahmin and half *shudra*. Putta is a *malera*. He’s of a Brahmin and a non-Brahmin mistress. Chandri is probably a woman born to a Brahmin. She is a *devadasi*. If you keep a *devadasi*, you can keep her as a mistress but you can’t eat the food that she cooks. And they say Naranappa is guilty of eating the food. It’s something absurd.

**Researcher:** That is absurd. You can use her but you cannot use her food.

**URA:** And hence you know, there are mixed tasks in my novels.

**Researcher:** Going back to tradition, sir, are you convinced that the greatness of Indian civilization lies in rituals, customs and traditions because we see you attach so much of importance to them? Your worldview is based on those rituals, as long as you know the meaning of the rituals?

**URA:** The problem is that it becomes a ritual only when you don’t know the meaning. We had a great writer called Pu ThiNarasimachar. Only with him the rituals became very meaningful. It became a sacred space for him and he communicated it in writing… I’m sorry, I have to go.

**Researcher:** Thank you so much, sir, for giving us your time. Hope that you get well soon.