

The Chronicler of the Cotton Country

An interview with Ki Rajanarayan

A Rangarajan

The senior Tamil writer, K Rajanarayan or Ki Ra as he is affectionately called has come to occupy a niche of a genre that draws deeply from oral traditions and narrative forms of story telling. Building on these traditions, his literature combines a rare psychological penetration and that has helped him charter his own course on the Tamil literary canvas of the present day. Ki Ra has a sizeable following and an ever widening circle of readership. In his 86th year Ki Ra could easily see himself as a complete writer grounded in life and experience. He had been a farmer and a freedom fighter, a communist and an activist, a great classical music enthusiast and a man of letters. Set mostly in the black soil region of Tirunelvely and adjoining parts his stories and novels have come to be deeply evocative of the lives these folks. Legends and lore combine with travails and tasks of every day living to weave stories rich in imagination that are rooted in a rare authenticity. Drawing mostly from hagiographic traditions Rajanarayan is almost indifferent to historic corroboration of the events that are central to the back drop of his narration., insisting that oral traditions carry peoples memories in an intimate manner shaping and making their worldview. That is why his adoption of the rural dialect for his narration blends in so well. When least expected, his stories could turn riveting transporting one right into the middle of the setting. You are no longer reading, you are actually witnessing! Ki Ra often writes about a bygone era and his writings preserve a slice of our memory. When his stories and novels were serialised in Ananda Viketan and other magazines, circulations swelled bring him much acclaim. Following this success he was invited by the Pondicherry University to be their visiting Professor of Folklore in . Ki Ra went on to publish a dictionary of folk usages in Tamil (Vattara Vazhakku Chollakarathi) and started compiling collections of Folk tales from many parts of the State. A pursuit that is keeping him busy even to this today. The Sahitya Academy Award honour was conferred on him in 2001 brining him into an elite circle of writers.

Question:

You have been writing for a very long time and. Kathavu was published in 1965 a small circle of readers have been admiring you ever since, yet it was Karisal Kattu Kadithasi that catapulted you to unprecedented popularity. What do you think was behind this appeal.

Answer:

I think it may have to do something with my style of writing. I adopted

a very oral style and an earthly manner of narration. Further the subjects and characters I presented were new to Tamil writing. I suppose there was a novelty that drew the attention of readers. My good friends and fellow writers were not happy that I abandoned chaste Tamil when it came to writing. We have always had a dichotomy when it comes to oral narration and written presentation in Tamil. I think I kind of broke that barrier. But then you should know before I started writing stories and essays I was an ardent letter writer. I would write long letters to my friends. I adopted this style of writing for my letters and later moved it to my creative pieces as well.

Question:

I wish to dwell on this question of Classical literature and Folk Literature. What do you think constitutes the essential difference between the two and with increasing urbanisation is Folk Literature on the wane as, by definition, Folk Literature is much localised and the urban phenomenon flattens out local contexts.

Answer:

This is indeed a complex subject. But then if you look carefully and with some insight the differences between the two are less than what is apparent. The form in classical literature is well laid out and established. The language and narrative rules are clearly known. While the form is important for any literature, it is the content that is at the heart of it all. You will find human frailties are universally dealt with in both forms of literature and that is where their appeal becomes so powerful. And if you see our Indian traditions even otherwise perfect Gods and Goddesses assume human forms and are very much in the grip of all emotions and shortcomings that we as humans are often caught in. They do not come in as infallible gods in the realm of literature. Folklore too deals with these same frailties but then the treatment is different. Moreover again in our context, often folklore provides the nucleus on which classical literature is built. On loss of localised paradigms, it is true that with the passage of time so many things go. I remember as a boy in the village we had our games especially for the rainy season. We had such specific facets that marked the rhythm of time and season. Not many remember that agricultural activities by night in the pre-kerosene era were restricted to the few days of moonlight we had in a month! Those were different times and so many stories of that era have been forgotten and they are no longer in circulation. While we could lament this loss, we cannot overlook the fact that change is a constant phenomenon of life. I do believe folk literature is taking newer forms even in the electronic era!

Question :

AK Ramanujam, hailed the awarding of the Sahitya Academy to you as a great recognition for all those who work on the folklore space. He was from the world of Academics quite known all over the world. You

too had your brush with that world while your were quite unconventionally invited to be a visiting Professor at Pondicherry University. It must have been a unique experience. How did you like it?

Answer:

It was a different world but then I did not do anything differently. I shared by experience with students encouraged them to do the same and I conducted my interaction with the students under the trees! I compiled and collected folk tales, encouraged people to talk about them and continued my writing. It was interesting work and I was invited to do things I liked doing and in that sense it was a unique opportunity while being an honour at the same time