

## Velcheru Narayana Rao

### Because You Asked



I was actually born in 1932, but officially in 1931. I have two dates of birth and belong to more than one country. Born in India and living in the United States, I teach in the Department of Languages and Cultures of Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison. My major area of interest is literary and cultural, literate and oral Indian texts in Telugu and Sanskrit. Most of my recent work is in collaboration with David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Among my publications: *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Tamil Nadu* (Delhi, 1992 – with David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam). *A Poem at the Right Moment* (Berkeley and New Delhi, 1998 – with David Shulman). – Address: 4501 Onaway Pass, Madison, Wisconsin 53711, USA.

Allasani Peddana, the court poet of the sixteenth-century South Indian emperor Krishnadevaraya, is said to have responded as follows when his patron asked him to write a book:

A quiet place,  
 camphor-betel sent by my lover through her confidante,  
 a hearty meal,  
 a swing cot,  
 and scribes and readers who understand my ideas –  
 without these  
 is it possible to write a good book  
 just because you asked for it?

I cannot say the Wissenschaftskolleg arranged all of these things for me, but it came close. Looking back at the ten months I have spent here, I feel good about the work I was able to accomplish. The major projects that I had in mind when I came to Berlin were three in number. The first was a book on South Indian historiography, on which I have been working for a few years now with David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. The second was a translation of Pingali

Surana's sixteenth-century *kavya*, *Kalapurnodyamu*, a remarkable text that we consider to be an early example of the South Asian novel. This translation was also a collaborative work with David Shulman. Related to this translation was an exploration of interpretive contexts for the *Prabhavati-pradyumnamu*, by the same author, and preparing myself to translate and write an introduction to this work. A third project was to complete the translation and presentation of a major Telugu work of the colonial period, Gurujada Apparao's play, *Kanyasulkam*.

An underlying idea behind this textual production and analysis is to present evidence that the heyday of modernity in India was earlier than usually thought, namely, in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries; that the colonial period caused a rupture in its progress; and that the generally accepted idea that India's modernity begins with the introduction of English is directly accountable for the break from the past and the cultural amnesia that resulted from colonial education.

These projects have advanced considerably in the time that I have been in Berlin. In a first phase, the historiography project was presented and discussed before a variety of audiences in Germany, at Berlin (the Free University), Heidelberg, and the Wissenschaftskolleg itself. We then completed a first draft by early 2001 and went on to revise it on the basis of very helpful comments and concrete suggestions offered by a number of our colleagues, notably Muzaffar Alam (New Delhi), Partha Chatterjee (Calcutta/Columbia), and Philippe Burrin (Geneva). Our main materials in this book were in the South Indian languages, and we argued that these literatures contained a variety of important historiographical works modern writers had so far neglected. Our attempt was thus at one and the same time to present these materials (with extensive translations) and to analyze them in their social and cultural contexts. We argued that this historiography was consciously produced by a highly literate and mobile group of so-called *karanams*, resident in the small towns and courtly centers of South India. These polyglot literati, who were as much at ease in Sanskrit and Persian as in Telugu or Marathi, were usually not court chroniclers, but rather functioned outside of the highly rarefied milieu of imperial centers. Their view from the level of villages and local towns thus sheds as much light on their own search for collective identity as on their ideas concerning kingship and social balance. We argued that a key concept needed in order to comprehend and analyze the *karanam* texts was that of "texture" – and that it is texture that sets apart such historical works

from epic, myth, or phantasmagoria. This argument underlies the title we chose for the book, which has now been completed: *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India*. An English version will appear by late 2001 or early 2002 from Permanent Black (New Delhi), while a French translation is projected for next year from the Editions du Seuil (Paris). We have gone on to make subsequent presentations on this and related materials (for example at St. Antony's College, Oxford, in May 2001). We hope to develop some aspects of this project beyond the book, namely the question of the social and cultural history of the *karanams*. In a related vein, I completed an extensive essay with Sanjay Subrahmanyam on early-colonial travel accounts in Telugu, which reflect a shift in the forms and modes of expression in prose in these literate milieus of South India. This essay will appear in a forthcoming volume titled *Circulation and Society in Colonial South Asia*, edited by Claude Markovits and others.

The work of translation and commentary on *Kalapurnodayamu* of Pingali Surana was also completed and will appear from Columbia University Press in 2002. The work is a novel in verse, with a series of stories within stories and a narrative that simply cannot be retold in any linear order. It combines a sophisticated level of reflection on the relationship of language and reality with an awareness of the interiorities of self. This text can hence be related to ongoing debates on the nature of modernity in South India. Surana's *Prabhavati-pradyumnamu* was the subject of a presentation I made in a workshop on "Love in South Asian Traditions", held at Cambridge University in May 2001.

The year was also a busy one in terms of presentations. Besides those already mentioned, I delivered a lecture on the *Bilhaniamu* at the Nehru Centre in London and a joint lecture with David Shulman at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Two other projects David and I were able to complete here were *Classical Telugu Poetry*, an anthology of Telugu poetry covering the period from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries, and the translation of a thirteenth-century text, *Kridabhiramamu*, with a long introduction.

During the latter part of my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I also gave a reading of my translations from twentieth-century Telugu poetry, from an anthology which I completed during my stay here, and saw through the final proofs.

This was a fruitful time. Of course, one always feels one could have done more, and I can still hardly claim to be able to read Goethe or Schiller in the original. But I can certainly claim to know

more about French and German wines than I did in October 2000, and the company of friends and the taste of Indian food (as cooked by Partha Chatterjee and Sanjay Subrahmanyam) has improved the quality of life this year. The occasion to listen to opera, see German theatre, and even visit the old jazz club has also been educational as well as enjoyable.

I was able to listen to a number of interesting seminars and meet colleagues ranging from Shahid Amin, who visited from Delhi, to Raghavendra Gadagkar, Mauricio Tenorio, Wang Hui, Navid Kermani, Philippe Burrin, Francis Snyder, Amitabh Joshi, Somdatta Sinha, and many more.

A story is never complete without a twist, and the burglars provided it for me when they ransacked my apartment and stole my laptop and my bankcard, with which they withdrew cash from my account. The blow was significantly softened by the supportive attention of Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus and Gerhard Riedel, who took me to the bank, helped with the police report, and even negotiated compensation for the stolen money from the bank. I am glad to report that the future occupants of N10 can hereafter sleep securely, now that the two windows that provided unfettered access to it have been properly barred.

I came to the Kolleg with a number of special needs regarding food. I do not eat meat, nor did I take milk and milk products for several months. The kitchen staff, especially Katarzyna Speder and Christine Klöhn, took special care of my needs, and their attention made the food taste a lot better than it would have otherwise. I also developed a severe back problem during the early months, and the medical attention, Claudia's massages, and the big exercise ball that Philippe Burrin helped me carry home from the sports store all greatly helped me in recovering from it.

Day after day, I went to Andrea Friedrich and Barbara Sanders, who had the magic skill of finding a solution to all practical problems and who took care of everything from finding a good doctor to obtaining a British visa at short notice.

To Eva Hund (now von Kügelgen) goes my last but not least mention of thanks. She taught me more than German – she taught me how to teach language. I have been teaching Telugu in Madison for thirty years and prided myself on being a good language teacher. Thanks to Eva, I hope I'll be a better teacher when I go back.