Introduction to Raghavendra Patil's Novel 'Chariot' – English translation of Kannada novel 'Teru'

- Dr. G S Amur

Raghavendra Patil belongs to the post modernist group of fiction writers in Kannada. Like his predecessors, U.R. Ananthamurthy, Yashvant Chittal and Shantinath Desai, he has arrived at the novel through the short story. Beginning with *Odapugalu* in 1978, he has published five collections of short stories, the latest being *Eshtu Kadatava Kabbakki* published last year (2015). *Teru*, which won the Sahitya Akademi award for him is his second novel. Though Patil belongs to the post modern era in Kannada fiction, he does not share either the thematic concerns or the techiniques of post modernism of the Western origin. His affiliations are more with the practitionaers of the nativist movement led by Chandrashekhar Kambar and the tradition of realism which produced great novelists like Kuvempu and Sivaram Karanth in the past. While Kambar's commitment to nativism, as in his well known novel *Shikhara Surya*, is total, Patil's interest in it is limited to folk myths and styles. He has also inherited many of the qualities of his famous uncle, Anandakanda, like interest in history and closeness to rural life.

The story that Patil tells in *Teru* through multiple participant narrators including his own persona covers a period of more than a hundred years, beginning from the days when the rule of the Peshvas extended to North Karnataka, to the years after the emergency, and relates to the Belagavi region of which the epicenter is an imagined villagae called Dharamanatti. The region is clearly identifiable through place names of towns and villages surrounding Dharamanatti. These places are vividly realized as Patil himself grew up in this region and knows them well. The term 'Teru' in Kannada stands for god's chariot as well as the ritual and festivity associated with it.

Traditionally 'Teru' is a symbol of social and religious harmony of a community, since people participate in it irrespective of caste and creed. Though the Dharamanatti *teru* has a representative character, its history, presented through song and myth by a group of folk singers known as Gondaligas, is complicated. The Vittalaswamy temple and chariot festival associated with it are the creation of Maratha adventurer by name Venkobarao, with a background of crime and deception, who lands accidentally in Dharamanatti and is installed as its ruler by machinations of Triumbaka Bhat, the Karabhari, with the approval of Peshva, the overlord, under a newly invented name, Rango Patawardhan. The full account of how the cunning Karabhari created a new identity for Venkobarao as a Brhmin and deputy of the Peshvas and entered into marital alliance with him to strengthen his own position had appeared long before *Teru* in a story called *'Deasagati'* published in 19192.

Venkobarao, named Rango Patawardhan, was a devotee of Vitthala of Panadharapur and it was he who built the magnificent temple dedicated to him and arranged annual celebration of the car festival. Thes were devotional acts but they were also calculated to legitimize his unlawfully acquired power. The *desagati* he established was welcomed by the people who had long suffered from robbers and dacoits in the absence of a local ruler. The Peshva did not mind the arrangement because the share of revenue due to him, '*chatha',* was regularly paid. The new rule was even hailed as 'ramarajya', by some people. The chariot festival to has a history of cruelty and deception. It is made possible by a human sacrifice, the memory of which is perpetuated for more than a century through the annual observance of a gory ritual called the blood-mark service rendered by a member of the family which has been tricked and tempted into offering one of its own members as sacrifice to the chariot by the feudal lord and his henchmen.

The novel offers two images of *teru*. The first, where the human sacrifice takes place in an unquestioned feudal environment and thee second, distanced by a century and a half, when the feudal order has been replaced by a new 'democratic' order, where religious devotion and feudal loyalty have been replaced by skepticism and politics of power. Tha *desagati* itself has by now come to a miserable end. Kalpanath Desai, the last of Dharamanatti Desais, deserted by his grandson Manik who has married an American woman and migrated, leaving his infant son to perish, commits suicide leaving all his property to Tibetan and Palestinian refugees, totally disowning Dharamanatti. Svanvajja, the highly respected leader of the community becomes a victim of communal prejudice because of this being a Jaina and invites death through Sallekhana. Tha temple itself is robbed and burgled and the gods, deprived of their dignity and wealth, are in a pathetic condition. The blood-mark-service too comes to an end, ironically on the very day of hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the car festival. The country itself is in the process of recovering from the traumatic experience of the Emergency.

The apocalyptic vision of the novel is redeemed in some measure by the positive achievements of two individuals removed in time but belonging to the same family. Significantly enough, they come not from the preveileged sections of society but from a family of outcastes. An interesting feature of Patil's technique is the repetition of names, which seems to be deliberate. There are for example two Dyavappas in the novel. Though they bear the same name and belong to the same stock, their careers are very different from each other. The first Dyavappa, a *killikyata* by caste and a practitioner of the humble profession of puppetry, chooses to sacrifice his fifth son to Vitthala's chariot, inspite of strong protests from his wife and his own gentle nature, because burdened with a large family and living in extreme poverty, he persuades himself to believe that the offer of land by the Commander's wife as compensation was a way of guaranteeing economic security to the other members of the family and an end to a wretched life of wandering from place to place in the persuit of his profession. In his simplicity he also believes that sacrifice is an act of service to the god. Calculated and inhuman as the act is it totally transform his personality. He takes the blood-mark-service with the utmost seriousness and follows a strict regime of preparation every year which involves getting rid of impurities in his blood and visiting holy places in the area. This total commitment elevates him to a spiritual height he never dreamt of and earns the respect and adoration of the community. People begin to look upon him as a saint, *santa,* and he is hounoured in his death both by the state as well as the people. The humble *Killikyata* whose profession was to show mythological characters from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* himself attains the status of a mythic character. The second Dyavappa, born several generations after the first, tries to follow the family tradition and example of his illustrious ancestor but is frustrated by various factors. The rellgious fervor which had marked the earlier generations in his family has almost disappeared and the blood-mark-service is now reduced to a materialistic exercise and rituals like the preparation for the service have turned hypocritical games. Dyavappa's father Kuberappa, for example, avoided the hardships of spiritual tour and spent the fortnight before going to the car festival in hiding at home. Dyavappa tells the narrator about his confrontation with his father : 'We used to argue with him. Do it properly or give it up if you have courage. What you are doing is abominable'. To add to his frustration and anger his mother, seduced by the *Gowda* of Kalliguddi, has left home to live with him. Unlike the first Dyavappa he has received some education and has a new perspective on life. Frustrated by his father's hypocricy and disillusioned by his mother's behavior he joins the movement against Emergency and is imprisoned for his attempted acts of violence. But the behavior of some of the leaders of the movement saddens him and he turns away from it in disgust. Just as the first Dyavappa's life was transformed by the sacrifice, his successor's life is

transformed by love and compassion. He falls deeply in love with a young widow from Dombara caste from a place called Udagatti and dreams of a happy married life. But his dream is not fulfilled. The girl's superstitious mother-in-law waits for the goddess's sanction for the marriage which never comes and though the girl herself is willing to have a physical relationship with him, his strong moral sense prevents him from accepting it. But the experience far from frustrating him elevates him morally and spiritually and escapes from mortal coils to join Baba Amte in his Ashram at Vardha. The second Dyavappa's achievement is no less remarkable than that of the first and it earns the admiration of the narrator. In a rare letter addressed to the woman he loved deeply he writes, 'You are always in my mind and I know I am in yours. Letters are unnecessary.' Jnanesvara had said something similar when Changdeva had written to him seeking a meeting.

> How can I draw a line between you and me!
>
> Where are boundaries?
>
> When you and me are one, is there a need
>
> For speech between us?

Dyavappa had realized that the meeting of minds and hearts was more important than physical relationship. It would of course be ridiculous to compare Dyavappa with Jnanadeva but there is resemblance, however remote, in the nature of spiritual experience.

Teru is a work of remarkable technical virtuosity. The choice of a journalist and an insider as the principal narrator, for example, is a master stroke, because it enables the novelist to blend objectivity with intensity. Whether it is the presentation of the feudal world which belongs to history or the modern with its complexities, he is remarkably objective. For example, though he concedes that the feudal *desagati* provided the people with a local centre of power easily accessible in times of need, he does not fail to lay bare its exploitative, self serving and manipulating nature. For example, facing a desperate situation, the Desai and the Karabhari agree to the human sacrifice but manage to save themselves and their families by deliberately misinterpreting the astrologer's reading and choosing a victim from the lower castes. The most manipulating of them all is the Commander's wife who traps Dyavappa with presents and offer of land.

The novelist's presentation of the human sacrifice through a folk myth sung by the *Gondaligaas* is another master stroke because it saves him from presenting it as a historical fact and from the responsibility of taking a moral stand. History and myth had always run together in relation to this event. One of the early versions of this unspeakable act included the narration that Vitthala himself had appeared on the scene on the back of Garuda and disappeared with the child in his arm.

The novelist's presentation of the modern world too is remarkable for its insight and objectivity. Conside, for instance, the scene where in the aftermath of the theft at the Vitthala temple, some young men of the village shout slogans for democracy and the rights of the younger generation in a crude attempt to overthrow the power of older people like Svanvajja, though they know nothing about democracy except the word. The way in which they play communal card against Svanvajja is a sign of times they were living in. The narrator's objectivity as a journalist is nicely balanced by the intimacy he enjoys with the places and persons of the region where the action of novel takes place. The closeness he establishes with

Svanvajja whom he meets accidentally, the ease with which he gains the confidence of Dyavappa whom he had seen only once as a boy in Kalliguddi, the tact with which he handles the powerful and menacing Gowda and his henchmen or his reaching out to Balavva in sympathy and understanding in Udagatti would not have been possible for an outsider who did not know people. Equally remarkable and intimate are his descriptions of the holy places that the original Dyavappa visits and sad change that the later Dyavappa notices when he visits them on similar journey. These are only a few examples. *Teru* which effectively blends myth and reality undoubtedly raises high expectations in the readers about Patil's future experiments in the form of novel.

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