**Lankesh P. (1935-2000)**

V. B. Tharakeshwar



P. Lankesh was a prominent Kannada novelist, short story writer, playwright, and essayist. A strong voice in the Kannada public sphere from the 1970s to the 1990s, he acted as a conscience-keeper not only through his writings, but also through *Lankesh Patrike*, a weekly he edited. Lankesh began his career as a teacher of English at Bangalore University, but soon shifted to filmmaking, then, journalism. His short story collections, *Kereya Neerannu Kerege Chelli* (1963); *Nanalla* (1970); *Umapatiaya Scholarship Yaatre* (1973); *Kallu Karaguva Samaya*(1990); and *Ullanghane* (1996), are landmarks in Kannada literature for the way they framed the debates in the respective decades. In his first novel, *Biruku* (1967), Lankesh used modernist techniques in writing, while his second novel, *Mussanjeya Katha Prasanga* (1978), shifted to the epic mode with episodic, multi-plot structure and a more realistic style of narration tinged with the comic. His third novel, *Akka* (1991), which depicts a woman of a slum through the eyes of her brother, was more pronouncedly political, reflecting Lankesh’s changed sensibility in the context of the Dalit and Bandaya (revolt) movement in Kannada literature, of which Lankesh was a vocal supporter.

Lankesh was also one of the most important Kannada playwrights of his time, alongside Girish Karnad and Chandrashekar Kambar. His early plays exhibit the influence of existentialism and the theatre of the absurd. The best examples are *T. Prasannana Gruhasthashrama* (1962); *Nanna Thangigondu gandu Kodi* (1963); *Polisariddare, Eccharike!* (1964); *Teregalu* (1964); *Kranti bantu, Kranti* (1965); *Giliyu Panjaradolilla* (1966). His later works *Sankranti* (1971) and *Gunamukha* (1993) are historical plays that reverberate with contemporary significance.

Lankesh has also published several poems of which “Avva” (Mother) has acquired the status of a contemporary classic. There are several translations of this poem in English. The poem uses a new idiom, unheard of in the Kannada literary tradition, to depict the figure of a mother. Lankesh was instrumental in consolidating the Navya movement through his edited anthology *Akshara Hosa Kavya* (1970). He translated Baudelaire’s poems into Kannada as *Paapada Hoogalu* (1974). He has also translated two Greek tragedies into Kannada.

Lankesh also experimented with filmmaking and won the national award for best direction for his film, *Pallavi* (1977). His other films include *Anuroopa* (1978), *Kandavideko Mamsavideko* (1979), *Ellindalo Bandavaru* (1980).

Lankesh founded a weekly magazine, *Lankesh Patrike* in 1980 and ran it without advertisements till his death in 2000. The magazine gave prominence to issues of marginal sections of society, and encouraged a young generation of Kannada writers in the 1980s and 1990s. Lankesh was also politically active, and played a pivotal role in the formation of the first two non-Congress governments in Karnataka in 1983 and 1985. He also floated a political party in 1987 called “Karnataka Pragati Ranga,” which unsuccessfully tried to forge electoral alliances with the Farmers’ Movement headed by Nanjundaswamy and Dalit Sangarsh Samiti to propose an alternative to both the Congress and the Janata Dal. However, Lankesh did not continue his electoral initiatives and chose to remain a critical voice through his writings.

**Timeline**

1962 First play, *T. Prasannana Gruhasthashrama*

1963 First collection of short stories, *Kereya Neerannu Kerege Chelli*

1967 First novel, *Biruku*

1970 Edits modernist anthology, *Akshara Hosa Kavya*

1974 Translates Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*

1977 Wins national award for direction for his film *Pallavi*

1980 Starts *Lankesh Patrike*

1987 Launches political party, Karnataka Pragati Ranga

**Select Bibliography**

*Translations in English*

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*When Stone Melts, and Other Stories* (2004), Short stories collection by P. Lankesh, Tr. Vanamala Vishwanatha. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.