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In Honor of D. R. Nagaraj

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He was just D. R. to those of us fortunate enough to call him friend. But few were aware that, in Kannadiga fashion, the D. stood for his native village (Doddaballapur in southeast Karnataka, India) and the R. for the name of his father (Ramaiah, a weaver by caste). D. R. was raised to be a weaver, too, and in fact, for a brief period as a child he wove in bonded labor. Few of us knew this, either, but we knew there were experiences in his life that made his scholarship the remarkable phenomenon it was in contemporary India.

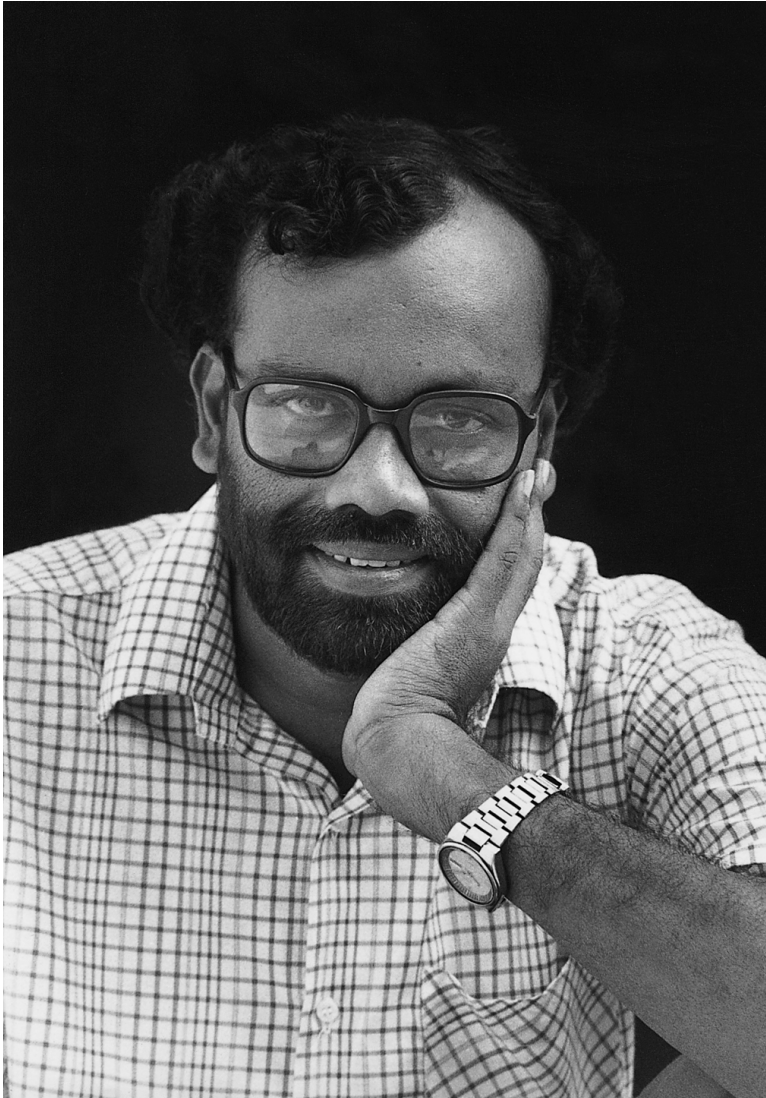
When D. R. became a visiting professor at the University of Chicago in 1996, he had gained a reputation as one of the leading cultural critics in India, and perhaps the foremost thinker of the politics of cultural choice among those he would refer to as historically humiliated communities, including *dalits* (those formerly called untouchables) and artisanal castes known as *shudras*. If this were all D. R. had to give, it would have been gift enough. But D. R. approached the problem of subaltern cultural choice from a perspective broadened not only by familiarity with contemporary metropolitan thought but also by profound study of the living cultures of rural India and of the precolonial past. It was especially in that past—the fact that so many South Asian intellectuals no longer had access to it was for D. R. an enduring catastrophe of colonialism—that he found important resources to recover and theorize. And he did this in a spirit neither of antiquarianism nor indigenism. D. R. understood that social and political justice cannot be secured without reasoned critique, and that the instruments of critique in postcolonial India had to be forged anew from an alloy that included precolonial Indian thought and culture—but only after being subjected themselves to critical inspection. In exploring these resources he showed the remarkable intellectual reach and curiosity that enabled him to speak across every disciplinary boundary and to explore an astonishing range of conceptual and ethical possibilities. In the months preceding his untimely death from a heart attack, D. R. was probing the nature of feminism as a frame for a new dalit literary criticism.

When we lost D. R. we lost a beloved friend and scholar as well as a visionary of the global political.

—*Sheldon Pollock and Carol A. Breckenridge*

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In Honor of



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D. R. Nagaraj  
20 February 1954–12 August 1998  
Scholar, Visionary, Friend