Azim Premji University

From the Selected Works of Chandan Gowda

June 19, 2007

Ramachandra Gandhi - The Passionate Philosopher

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Op-Ed, New Indian Express
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It was difficult not to be touched by the passionate being of Ramachandra Gandhi. He brought a philosophical seriousness to everything around him, leaving us in astonishment at his gifted mind. I was part of a small group of people who attended his lectures on the Upanishads and “the seven sages of modern India” at Bangalore University, where he had accepted a visiting professorship in philosophy a few years ago. I also had the good fortune to earn his friendship and spend time with him outside class.

Ramu had made his home in the world of advaita-vedanta. In his presence, though, this world of advaita was awake to the difficult problems of modern society: the threat of nuclear war, religious fundamentalisms, consumerism, to name a few. It is this engagement of the transcendental philosophy of advaita with the ethical challenges of contemporary society that made Ramu a distinctive thinker. He recalled that the intellectual unease he felt while studying western analytical philosophy at Oxford later flowered into a passion for advaita. He accepted Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Sri Ramana Maharshi as his gurus (alongside whom, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Narayana Guru, and J. Krishnamurthi make up Ramu’s list of sapta rishis of modern India). He firmly believed that these sages held the regenerative powers of Hindu philosophy and could enchant contemporary social life.
Radical freedom lies in recognizing our interconnectedness with human and non-human life at all times. This basic orientation of Ramu’s political philosophy, which sought to overcome the strict separation between the self and other (“freedom from otherness”), is richly elaborated in his recent novel, *Muniya’s Light*, and *Svaraj*, a book of meditative reflections around Tyeb Mehta’s painting “Shantiniketan Triptych.”

Another valuable book, now out of print, “I am Thou: Meditation on the Truth of India,” gathers Ramu’s succinct advaitic reflections on many key political questions.

Ramu regretted the abdication of transcendental concerns with the meaning and purpose of life in modern politics, which merely advocated the cause of exclusive identities of caste, religion, class and nation, without contemplating the possibility that these identities might be false answers to the questions “who am I?” and “who are we?” His intellectual quest was in the service of retaining India’s civilizational autonomy (svaraj) in a fast globalizing world. While the West’s economic domination is often criticized in our public discussions, little concern is shown towards the domination of its intellectual frameworks over the rest of the world. Ramu’s work was a tireless effort to keep an archive of Indian texts from being swept away by the power of modern secular knowledge.

Another political concern of Ramu was to keep the sanctity of Hindu philosophy from being violated by right-wing fundamentalist politics. In addition to positing a falsely exclusivist Hindu identity, he argued, the politics of right-wing hatred forgets that Hinduism emphasizes the value of overcoming the ego. His critique of the violence of religious fundamentalism was rooted in Indian ethical traditions. In *Sita’s Kitchen*, written before the demolition of the Babri Masjid, he reflects deeply on the ethical
demands of the Ayodhya crisis with the help of a Buddhist tale where the Buddha asks a few young men to search for their self instead of seeking revenge. In a post-script to this book, he writes: “Rama Bhakti in India today needs enlightened trusteeship, not manipulation by the politics of historical revenge.”

Always emphasizing that our inter-dependence be non-exploitative, Ramu’s thought was never an escape into a metaphysical comfort zone removed from the world of politics. For instance, his counsel for those wondering how religions can co-exist in society: whatever be your definition of religion, add non-violence to it; it would then become free of the impulse to dominate other religions and its outward form will change. While some may differ with Ramu’s advaitic perspective on politics, it is undeniable that his work was an invitation to explore Indian approaches to issues of social justice and freedom. Anyone interested in thinking about an Indian model of radical politics will find an exciting co-traveller in him.

Ramu loved to dwell on the meanings underlying Hindu names. He would explain that the name “Gandhi” derived from Gandha (perfume) and that the Gandhis were originally traders of perfume. He would then add that Mahatma Gandhi could be seen as spreading perfume in a malodorous age! It is perhaps worth noting here his discomfort about the special attention, which he felt was “undeserved,” he frequently received for being Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson. Nevertheless, he was grateful that that relationship “held out an urgent invitation to inquire into the meaning of truth and non-violence.”
Ramu Gandhi did not approve of modern thought’s obsession with the society of the living, which excluded the dead and the not born-yet. For him, the self was without beginning (anadhi) and without end (anantha). He continues to be with us.