

# BRINK

S.L. BHYRAPPA

TRANSLATED BY

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FROM THE KANNADA NOVEL *ANCHU*



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# PREFACE

*Brink* is the translation of *Anchu* (1990), a Kannada novel by renowned philosopher-historian-litterateur Padmashri Dr S.L. Bhyrappa. It is a prominent work that deserves to be reckoned alongside his other works – *Vamshavriksha*, *Niraakarna*, *Daatu*, *Parva*, *Nele*, *Sakshi*, *Tantu*, *Saartha*, *Mandra*, *Aavarana*, and *Uttarakaanda* – most of which are translated into English besides pan-Indian languages. His autobiography *Bhitti* is as engrossing as his novels.

*Brink* deliberates on the nature of male–female love from physical, moral, and philosophical angles. Dr Amrita<sup>1</sup>, the female character, repeatedly suffers from the severest urge to commit suicide, and the male counterpart Mr Somashekhar<sup>2</sup> anchors her to life each time. She nevertheless revolts, and he inevitably becomes the target of her unrelenting anger, torture, and blackmail – emotional and moral. With great personal suffering, perseverance, and sacrifice, he brings her back to normalcy.

Ostensibly, *Brink* is a love saga between a widower and an estranged woman. Obviously, it borders on adultery, but on the part of the man, it is not adultery. His empathy is genuine, and it morphs into love. As would a guru, he assumes responsibility to make her realize a value expounded in the *Bhagavadgita*, that is, *nirlipti*<sup>3</sup>

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1 Paradoxically, 'Amrita' means 'ambrosia'.

2 'Soma-shekhar' is a synonym of Lord Shiva, whose anthropomorphic form is adorned in the head (*shekhar*) by a moon (*soma*). In a mythological event, Shiva swallowed poison to save the universe.

3 Its roots are traceable to the Upanishads, but delineation and prescriptiveness is lucid in *Bhagavadgita*.

(selfless conduct/ unaffectedness) vis-à-vis her estate usurped by her kin in particular and vis-à-vis the familial injustice perpetrated by them in general. Compliance to his wisdom equips her with the means to overcome depression. Such leverage and his compassion for her go on to serve as her emancipation, thereby doing away with the need for a psychiatrist. The remedial nature of this traditional canon makes human distress bearable. *Brink* would like to know if such values of Indian tradition appeal to the readers as worthy of inculcation.

The aforementioned constitutes the philosophical undercurrent of the novel. What equally matters in a work of fiction is its linguistic vehicle, and the creative narrative of *Brink* is enthralling to say the least. Employing techniques such as flashback, stream of consciousness, internal drama, and tension, this novel is verily quick-paced. Considering that there isn't much of interconnected 'events' in this tale, to be able to pen these many pages of anatomized emotional catharsis between two lovers – actually entirely the abreaction of one of them – and still make it engrossing is nothing short of ingenuity.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In relating the thoughts of the characters in this novel – and his other novels as well – it is typical of Dr S.L. Bhyrappa to script contiguously within a single sentence the seemingly disparate thoughts as they occur in their minds. Though the constituent parts of this ‘stream of consciousness’ are almost complete semantically, they are mostly incomplete syntactically, except possibly the last in the series. While translating sentences thus structured, care has been taken to strike a balance between retaining the ‘stream’ per se and splitting it into several sentences with a view to ironing out the impediments to comprehension. I have ensured that the former instances are sustainable within the ipseity of English language, wherefore there shall neither be confusion in the minds of the readers nor loss of import. A maximal example is the passage in pages 62 and 63.

Also typical of the literary narrative of this author is synthesis of actuality, author’s take, and characters’ thought/speak<sup>1</sup> in the same sentence. Here too, I have been selective in retaining such script per se. Wherever retained, it is not at the cost of comprehension.

I am aware that such structuring is not legit, but I feel it to be kosher here for two reasons: one, this is not a work of science, and two, it serves to impart aesthetic experience to the reader in the manner the original endeavours to.

Typically, glossary is suffixed to a literary work, but those are treatises all. This is fiction, and it would be a breach of relish to *take*

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1 The three types of literary expressions distinctly defined in Indian poetics.

a *break* for referring to the glossary. Listed below (alphabetically) are terms typical to Indian traditions and culture (to the exclusion of contextually comprehensible ones), which the readers outside of the subcontinent might be unfamiliar with. It is therefore suggested that the readers familiarize themselves with these few before embarking on an exhilarating journey of poring over the tale.

- **Bheema** (p. 270) is a physically robust Pandava sibling in the epic *Mahabharata*, and **Hidimba** is his wife from a marriage of convenience. She belonged in the rakshasa (demon) clan.
- **Draupadi** (p. 270) is the polyandrous wife to the five Pandava siblings in the epic *Mahabharata*. Dr S.L. Bhyrappa surmises that polyandry was in vogue in India till the era preceding *Mahabharata*, and that Draupadi could be one of the last victims of it for it came to be looked down upon thereabouts. The marriage institution's perpetual subjection to experimentation the world over is one of the synopses that induced Dr S.L. Bhyrappa to study *Mahabharata*; Draupadi thereat. The results of his expeditious scholastic research are handed over to all posterity in *Parva*.
- **Dussehra** and **Ramnavami** (p. 91) are annual festivals. The former is typically a *Kṣatriya*<sup>2</sup> festival, and continues to be celebrated in a grand way by the royal family of Mysore (southern India) and communally all over Bengal (eastern India). The latter is in celebration of the birth of Lord Rama and is held

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2 *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, and *Sūdra* are 'varṇas', the four pragmatic leagues, and every individual was reckoned as belonging in a certain varṇa in consonance with one's societal obligations. The design is congenial for migration through the varṇas, and there have been quite some instances, a prominent one being that of *Viśvāmitra*. A pertinent proposition is also featured in this author's novel *Parva*, the recreation of the epic *Mahabharata*. In consonance with the successive advancements and diversity in science and technology over the eons, this skill-based system of categorization has been uneventfully withering with endorsement from the inherent anthropological adaptability of Indian traditions.

communally across India. Both festivals are also celebrated in homes. Cultural events – especially classical vocal/instrumental music – are integral to communally celebrated festivals.

- **Ekalavya** (p. 218): In the epic *Mahabharata*, Droṇa is the preceptor to the Pandavas and Kauravas. He vowed to groom the Pandava sibling Arjuna into a pre-eminent archer and tutored him accordingly. Eventually surfaces an obscure hunter called Ekalavya, who attained parity with Arjuna in archery. Ekalavya had aspired to get tutored by Droṇa, but the latter rejected him. Without getting disheartened, he installs a Droṇa statue, hones his warfare skills (that were default in him by virtue of he being a hunter) on his own in the spirit of having learned it from the statue, and pays obeisance to it. When Droṇa gets to know of his achievement, he is disturbed that his pet pupil Arjuna is no more the only one at the top. He sets the situation right by requisitioning an unreasonable tuition fee from the doctrinally devout Ekalavya – his severed proper thumb so that he can no more wield an arrow! This is featured intricately and extensively in Dr S.L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*.
- **Gokulāṣṭami** (p. 110) is an annual festival held in celebration of the birth of Lord Krishna. Gokula is the place where he was born, and *Aṣṭami* (eighth) is the day of the lunar month in which he was born.
- **Hanuman** (p. 166), a character in the epic *Ramayana*, is the most ardent providential devotee in all of Indian classical literature. His devotion to Lord Rama is unparalleled. His master would be present in his heart every single moment. There is an anecdote about him peeling off his chest to reveal his master's presence there.
- **homa** (p. 156) is a rite that necessarily entails assorted offerings into *agni* (p. 176), the sacrificial fire, accompanied by iterative chanting of mantras to invoke blessings of the gods on auspicious

occasions such as wedding, christening, *upanayanam* (threading ceremony), house-warming etc. It is also done as part of funeral rites with distinct chants/ procedures.

- ***Kālabhairava*** (p. 63) is a reincarnation of Lord Shiva, the leveller among the triad (the other two being Brahma, the creator, and Viṣṇu, the sustainer). As is typical in Indian mythology for every god to have a unique carrier, *Kālabhairava* rides a dog. In Indian mythology, dog is allegoric of past life too.
- ***kesaribhāt*** (p. 162) is a simple sweet pudding made from semolina.
- ***masurpāk*** (p. 248) is a crispy sweet made from chickpea (*masur*) flour. It is pronounced (and in the marketplace invariably spelled) ‘Mysorepak’, a queer result of its popularity – and possibly its genesis – in Mysore, South India.
- ***pallu*** (p. 37) is the decorative fringe of sari worn over the shoulder after the rest of it is used up for draping.
- ***puja*** (p. 156) is ritualistic worship wherein God is symbolically served as would a guest<sup>3</sup> actually be.
- ***royal jasmine*** (p. 16), *Jasminum grandiflorum*; ***jasmine*** (p. 215), *Jasminum officinale*.
- ***Sri*** (p. 96): The honorific masculine prefix *Śrīmān* abridged in usage.
- ***thirteen years*** (p. 151) is the duration of the forestial exile imposed on the Pandavas in the epic *Mahabharata* (for losing a game of dice), including going underground during the last year,

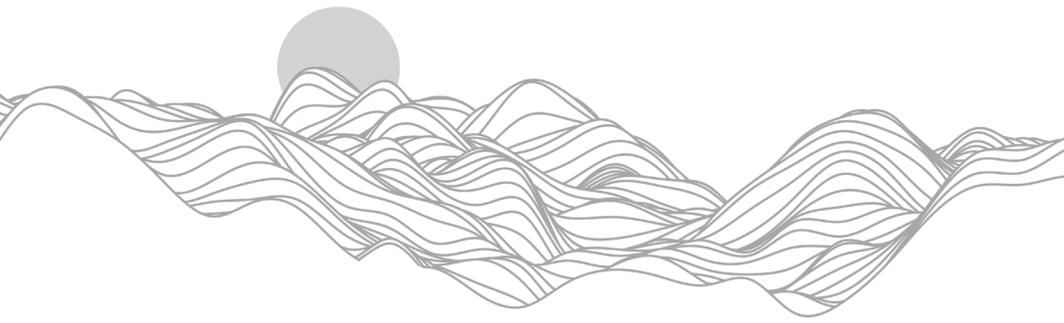
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3 The Indian tradition recognizes two types of guests: the invited (*abhyāgata*) and the walk-in (*atithi*). The invited is by default venerable, for s/he has merited invitation. The walk-in is accorded greater veneration in Indian tradition and is ascribed a place among the godly – mother, father, teacher, and *atithi*. There is no bigger charity than opening up our private time and space to others, more so to the unacquainted, for it will sometime be our turn to be one! An aspect of Indian tradition in serving an *atithi* is evidenced in the conversation among Dr Amrita, her brother, and her aunt (p. 371). Another aspect of it is delineated in this author’s novel *Sakshi (Witness)*.

with the condition that they shall go through another thirteen-year-cycle if uncovered during that last year.

- ***uppittu*** (p. 65), also known as *upma*, is a popular South Indian breakfast dish prepared from semolina. There are several variants of *uppittu*, and the recipe ranges from simple to motley.
- ***Vaikunṭha*** (p. 86), colloquial for *Vaikunṭha samārādhana*, is a religious oblation for the departed held on the thirteenth day of death. The preceding twelve days witness funeral rites, but this thirteenth is festive.
- **weekly victuals guest** (p. 110): In the not so distant past preceding the Indian IT revolution, there was a system wherein one moving to a nearby city to pursue higher academics would enquire, seek recommendations, and arrange with seven households (normally of the same/related caste that one belonged in) to provide him with the day's food on corresponding days of each week.





Somashekhar wasn't so haughty as to think it befitting of an Architect functioning from a panelled office to only conceive and design new buildings, not counsel in the matter of refurbishing old ones. Not until now though had someone sought him out for a maintenance job. Seemingly decrepit, the large oldish Madras-roofed bungalow with no upper stories stood amidst a sprawling turf on Lalitamahal Road on the outskirts of Mysore. Apparently, it wasn't repainted since construction, and by the very fact of its antiquity, one could aver that the wood used for doors and windows was pure teak. Only in the good old days was timbering synonymous with teak. One glimpsing the fifteen-feet-high roof can't help reflecting on its suitability for suicidal lynching. Two cracks have developed right in the middle of the roof, causing water to seep and pool on the floor below when the skies opened up. Soaked and stained in the rainwater, the exquisite mortar floor was unsightly. Landlady Dr Amrita's car was old too, an early model Fiat weathered by sun and rain and appearing antiquated, but as sturdy as the house. 'This leakage has to be plugged. Entire house has to be repainted. How much will it cost totally? You have to get this done, please.'

He mulled over and said, 'The upper concrete layer along the crack has to be chipped off and laid afresh. This costs nine thousand. Scraping the old paint on all walls and laying fresh distemper will cost thirty thousand.'

Her face showed anxiety on hearing the colossal quote. She said, 'Should think about it. Be back.' But she did not revert for about a month. One evening, she visited him and said diffidently, 'I have

to forego the repainting. Right now, even the nine-thousand-rupee repair job is beyond me. Is there no other economical way? Monsoon is around the corner. Repairs can't be foregone. The thought of the dribbling rainwater is scary. But now....' Demurely, she stopped short of restating her pecuniary constraints.

He empathized with her plight, pondered, and said, 'There is another way – chipping along the crease and sealing the cleft with tar. It however protects through one monsoon only. If the tar melts during the ensuing summer, rainwater will seep. Costs five or six hundred. Painting the house with just primer will cost one thousand only.'

She mused for a moment and said, 'For now, get the tar filled. After two months, I will go for the primer work.' Somashekhar summoned a mason, climbed up a tall ladder, gave instructions to him, and got the work done. He understood that some time back this was a flourishing household; in a bad shape now. 'Though a minor work, you have gone through it earnestly. Please state your fee,' she said.

'When I handle a full-fledged job, I will charge fee on percentage or other basis. Now, no.' He gently but firmly resigned her offer. A mother of two sons, a seven-year-old and a four-year-old, a well-educated woman, astute of intellect, of tall build with attractive facial features, among them keen eyes, and a university lecturer holding a doctoral degree in Kannada literature. She handles everything herself; her husband's not around. She hasn't spoken a single word about him yet. Enquire about him? He abandoned that thought. Now that I have got her work done, there will be no contact anymore. Nevertheless, she lingered in his mind for a few days.

Not just she, even that house hung on. Quite a few times he contemplated as to what was intriguing in that old big Madras-roofed bungalow that presented no noticeable architectural speciality. One day, it crossed his mind. Behind the house, reaching out to the

sky was the Chamundi Hill. With foliage or without, this hill has an enigmatic existence of its own – a bridge to the mysterious sky. What other periphery does a house with such a hill as its background need! Even as he framed that picture in his mind, he recalled his bland career at Bombay. Such spacious site is non-existent in that titanic city. Such individually characteristic independent house did not belong in that city. Only multi-storied – of late, fifteen- to twenty-storied – lacklustre edifices, wherein an architect's enterprise is limited to the adaptation of latest equipments developed in Europe and America to the congested environ at hand. The thought of moving to Mysore dawned after four years' ennui of the career and life in Bombay. If nothing else, the possibility of constructing unique and individualistic, albeit small, buildings was appealing. Not just that, whatever the present growth and density of Mysore, the open sky can be watched unobstructed. The old Kukkarahalli Lake is very much there. Though vegetation is deplete in patches, no factory has devoured the Chamundi Hill. The childhood obsession of climbing the hill alone at dusk or dawn, beholding the panorama from the peak, and watching at length – till sweat dried up – the serenely dignified but un-arrogant expanse of the township of Mysore surfaced and began to haunt. He recalled that on moving here, abandoning his work many an evening, he had scaled the hill at dusk and was absorbed in gazing the canvas of the horizon fostered by the glistening crimson white radiance of the receding sun. A desire arose in him to identify, on his next visit to that quarter of the hilltop, the house he got repaired.

One day, on a Monday evening at 4, she called him. 'I am frittering away your time alright, but my mind needs solace. Next Sunday you are joining me for tea in my house. Please do not dodge me.'

He was delighted on hearing the voice and for being invited. Instantly, he understood the treat as gratis for having got the work done without receiving any fee. He recalled that it had rained heavily

the day before – the first showers of the monsoon. The roof would not have leaked. Was this tea party in expression of gratitude! He enquired, ‘Did the roof leak in yesterday’s rains?’

‘To be frank, I was not sure that the repair work would so effectively plug the leakage. Not a single drop seeped. I do not know how to express my gratitude. Sunday, please visit without fail.’ He felt glad, but on second thoughts, attempted to evade. She, however, persisted till he consented.

He felt ecstatic that in six days, he would visit her and spend about an hour conversing face-to-face with her over tea. All his spare time, his mind would be in anticipation of that event. But by the evening of Wednesday, he thought of backing out by offering some excuse. Why? What is wrong with visiting her? Though no clear reason emerged, the desire to back out turned out to be irresistible. The next morning offered a pretext for visiting elsewhere on Sunday. One Bopanna of Virajpet had consulted him to construct a house in his new coffee estate. He set the site inspection for the very Sunday and made arrangements to leave Mysore on the eve. He mailed a postcard to her residence on Friday so that it would reach her on Saturday. He just wrote, ‘I have to leave station on some professional work. I am unable to visit tomorrow. Sorry, please excuse.’ But while strolling in the Kaveri estate of Bopanna, beholding its topography and periphery, and assessing the length and breadth of the proposed building, he began repenting why did I pointlessly resign her cordial invitation? Shouldn’t I rather have visited her today and appointed this for tomorrow? Glancing at his watch while returning to Mysore, he reflected that he would presently have been leisurely chatting with her.

It was one week since. He had almost forgotten her. Work pressure was excessive too. Mind was fully engrossed in giving suitable form to the Virajpet barn. On Monday, at about 1 pm, she called him. Assistant Neelakanthappa had just left for lunch.

It was his regular practice to break for lunch after Neelakanthappa returned. She enquired, ‘Mr Somashekhar?’

‘Yes, good afternoon.’

‘This is Dr Amrita. Good afternoon. I owe you fee for fixing the roof of my house. How shall I remit? Shall I come over myself? Or shall I send in a cheque?’

‘What fee? For what profound job? Wasn’t the matter settled then and there?’ he was surprised.

After a moment’s silence, she said, ‘Extensive work or not, I am obligated to pay. It is one thing if we were friends.’

‘Aren’t we already?’

‘How can one who has reservations about accompanying at tea be considered a friend?’ her question embarrassed him.

‘I had to leave town urgently.’

‘You had to go to Virajpet. You could have scheduled it for another day. That apart, you could have called me directly and said, “I can’t visit on Sunday, will drop in another day.” You washed your hands off by dropping a postcard with a message of the tenor “*can't visit. Nothing else.*” What feelers will such a message send out?’ When she’d finished, he felt guilty of misdemeanour. He was at a loss to find an excuse. At the other end, she was intently waiting with the receiver in hand. She resumed her speak, ‘Care to know what my feelers were on seeing your letter? I am a damsel in distress who can’t afford to fix the leaking roof. Therefore, you refused fee. My invitation to tea was in expression of my gratitude, and you dodged even that. Right?’

‘My! Madam, I had no such thoughts; not even now. Please do not misunderstand me. I will visit some day and ... yes, have lunch.’ He was plainly apologetic.

‘Well then, tomorrow at 1 pm, you are coming over for lunch, okay?’ He readily accepted the invitation. She has understood that I dodged her that day. Regrets about that act pervaded his mind. She

has thought of it as my disdain towards her destitution. She is genial. Why did I pointlessly spurn her cordiality, get spurned rather? Have I but one confidant in this place? The thoughts comforted him. He was levitated by spirits that soared and permeated the expanse of the sky.

In that forlorn and sparsely populated part of the town to the left of the hill, whose tor seemed to mark the altitude of the sky, she awaited him at the appointed hour by the door of her old lonely house that stood amidst vast vacant surroundings. Even as he took off the helmet and rang the doorbell, the door flung open and the clock in the drawing space struck 1 pm. 'Welcome,' she greeted with a smile, led him to a section of the house that could be called a lounge, and showed him to a big old patchy sofa.

'No college today?' he launched the conversation.

'Social Sciences classes are held from 7:30 am to 11:30 am. Till we move to own premises, I will be home by 11:45.' She seated herself on a sofa opposite him.

He continued, 'Said you are an academician in Kannada literature. While in Mysore earlier, I used to read Kannada fiction, used to croon odes. After moving to Bombay, I lost touch. I now aspire to read during my leisure time. In fact, that is one of the reasons I relocated from Bombay to Mysore. Will you lend from your collection?' Both chatted happily for half an hour. She then led him to the big old dining table, appointed his salver, and took a seat opposite him. No one else was in the house. He surmised that both her sons were away in school. She had prepared vegetable pulao, rice, plain curry, vegetable stew, and fruit salad. Chiding his moderate ingestion, she filled his cup of fruit salad again and again, threatening to spill on his shielding hands. Lunch over, they retreated to the lounge and, as before, positioned themselves on the facing sofas. The gentle aroma of the royal jasmine flowers that she had worn in her plait pervaded. He inhaled subtly but deeply, and relished the aroma.

He recalled that he had earlier noticed her fancy for royal jasmine flowers. She prefers mild colours to the gaudy. The colour additive in the fruit salad was a golden mean between plain and tinge. So were the hues and motifs on the saris she wore. He deduced that she would shy away from the garish red and yellow of the Tamils, as also the blood red and wild Holi colours of the Punjabis. Imprudently, he even expressed it. 'You prefer royal jasmine to jasmine for its aroma is milder, right?' Delighted that he has noticed and noted her taste for the flower she preferred, she blushed. Guarding himself, he spoke up as if his words were commonplace. 'I say so having noticed the tastes of my clients. Highly educated people prefer mild hues and gentle aroma. The less educated are overindulgent in matters of colour, smell, and taste. Inclination to spicy foods that instantly incite the palate and flare the nostrils is characteristic of the illiterate. Your cuisine was in all ways moderate. Hone taste.'

She was happy that he once again spoke appreciatively of her. It mollified her mind. She said, 'You too do not like intense colours and intense flavours, wherefore you are appreciative of those who follow suit.'

He enthusiastically added, 'So we share a specific wavelength.'

They talked away till 4:30. In between he said, 'Your house is finely positioned against the background of the hill. There is ample front yard. Please nurture a garden. The portico would be aesthetic if adorned by dense royal-jasmine creeper. A floral courtyard is very invigorating. The Horticulture Department has supplies of all saplings, seeds, and shoots. Monsoon has set in. Sowings will germinate without fail.'

She felt that this was a genial suggestion. She acknowledged, 'I am from the Ghats. Belong in coffee plantations. I love greenery.' When he took leave of her, she handed him four Kannada novels and two poetry collections that she brought from her study and