

**Four decades of Journey through Writing:  
An Interview with Dr. P. Raja**

**Interviewed by Dr.K.V.Raghupathi**

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**K.V. RAGHUPATHI:** You have completed an unbroken four decades of writing in your life. Almost half of your life has been devoted to writing career. It is a remarkable achievement in one's life. You are born and brought up in French Pondicherry and you have identified yourself with it. Among the writers writing in English from Pondicherry, if one is asked to name a writer of prominence, one would suggest only your name. Raja is Pondicherry, Pondicherry is Raja. How did you begin your writing career? Have you ever thought that you wanted to become a writer in your life?

**P. Raja:** I plan to write a book on this subject, my dear friend Raghupathi. I will talk at length of my writing career beginning with my classmate and good friend R. Marimouthou and ending with god knows what. When we were very young, say just out of school, my friend and I used to wander on the promenade of our lovely beach in Pondicherry all the time talking and listening over a cone of *sundal* (boiled Bengal gram added with chilies, chopped onions and coriander leaves). He was a voracious reader who could never keep his reading to himself. He always shared them with me. He was a good narrator too. I was very much benefitted by his reading. After re-telling me the story that delighted him, he analysed not the story but the style of the author. In fact, he was indirectly inspiring me to write and teaching me how not to write. He was the first one who showed me the right path towards the golden valley of writing.

Throughout my career as student I had excellent teachers, dedicated to their profession. I would be mistaken for an unthankful beast if I fail to register here the names of two professors under whom I had the privilege of studying English Literature. One was Professor R. Venugopalan Nair and the other Professor N. Santhalingam. Till today, both maintain excellent home libraries that are still growing. Both these gods in human form took me around the realms of gold. I began to read a book a day borrowing from their libraries that were made accessible to me. It was this reading habit that was moulding the unborn writer in me.

Years later when I was appointed Tutor in English by the Government of Pondicherry and sent to Karaikal (an enclave of Pondicherry) I had the opportunity of serving under Prof. N. Santhalingam, who was heading the department of English. He was also the editor of the college magazine. Since he valued me as his best student he assigned me to write an article for the magazine. I was trying to dodge his arrows but at one point they pinned me down. At that time I was reading the complete essays of Marti Larni, a Finnish writer. I wrote my first article 'Laugh with Larni'. Hence my first effusion appeared in Arignar Anna Government Arts College magazine (1975-76). My article immediately got reproduced in a local English monthly *Youth Age*. Its editor George Moses, a retired police officer, sent me a copy along with a note to

contribute regularly to his monthly. I started responding to his request. Then I branched out in the same year.

The year 1975 is the most memorable year in my life. I got a government job. I got married to my childhood sweetheart, Periyanyaki. I started writing.

***K.V. Raghupathi: So you are only a forced writer? I mean, the writer in you has been thrust upon you. Can you throw light on it?***

***P.Raja:*** No writer is born with a laptop in one hand and a dictaphone in the other, to call himself a born writer. You know, the American poet Ezra Pound was called by his fans as a born poet. But a critic said of him, “He calls himself Pound but not worth a Penny”. So opinions alter and falter. Professor N.Santhalingam advised me to write. I would not have heeded to him had his been a command. But he was responsible for waking up the slumbering writer in me. Once the writer in me was put on the track there was no looking back. Koo...kukoo...the high speed rail engine moves on.

***K.V.Raghupathi: If you look at your career, what is your level of satisfaction and fulfillment? Were there any challenges, difficulties and pitfalls in your career? How strong are you as a writer?***

***P.Raja:*** Life is not worth living if there are no challenges, difficulties and pitfalls. Only these things give you nerves of steel. I do not compete with others. I do not envy others. Yet a few of my colleagues in the college who liked my writings but hated me for writing well posed a threat. I broke their backbones by writing more and publishing them in enviable magazines and journals both in India and abroad. And that put an end to their mocking and unpleasant smiles. I was able to jump over all the obstacles with a pole called confidence. I have a lot of it in my system.

***K.V.Raghupathi: Your profile speaks of you as a prolific writer. You are a columnist, poet, short story writer, novelist, dramatist, essayist, biographer, local historian, folklorist, book reviewer, critic, translator and an editor. In which literary form, you think, you’ve excelled?***

***P. Raja:*** This question should be addressed to my critics or literary historians. Now that this arrow is shot at me, I should rush to say that writing is my passion. I love to see my creations in print. When I write I am comfortable with what I do. Awards galore came to honour the poet in me. Recognition came to the fictionist in me. My books on local history run to different impressions. Lieutenant governors during their tenure in Pondicherry manage to smell me and honour me in a fitting way for my overall achievement, an honour that is not given to any other writer here. Though I cannot claim like the British Romantic poet Lord Byron who said: “One morning I awoke to find myself famous”, I can still say that all my books are read. I strongly believe in the saying “Success approaches those who are very busy”. I am a real buzzing busy bee. What gives me the most satisfaction is that a good number of researchers and professors study my writings for seminar presentations and doctoral dissertations. That means I am worth the salt as a writer.

***K.V.Raghupathi: Pondicherry figures prominently in your writings. What inspired you to write about Pondicherry and people around you? Where do you mostly get your ideas?***

**P.Raja:** I can write only about the people and the place I am familiar with. Born and brought up in Pondicherry, I am a native of this divine soil. It gave me a decent job. It gave me a palatial house to live in, where seven generations of my ancestors lived. It gave me good neighbours and intimate playmates who still continue to be my good friends. The beautiful village (now where has it gone?), our village river that rushed its waters to the Bay of Bengal, our paddy fields that were our playgrounds now and again, our ponds that made us fishermen, all those tall and bushy trees that told us that we are born of monkeys and the list is very long... All of them have gone deep into my psyche. Now and then I go down memory lane for my raw material. I think I am good at adding salt or sugar to it.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *You worked and retired as a teacher in English in a Government college where workload is heavy, full and inescapable. How did you blend your teaching career with writing career? Which one has given you more satisfaction, teaching or writing?*

**P.Raja:** To be a good teacher one should be a good reader. To be a good writer one should be a good reader. Without the blessed reading habit both the teacher and the writer are nothing. And I am a good reader right from my student days. You have come to my house on several occasions, my dear Raghupathi. You know my house is walled with books. I not only collect books of literary taste but also I read them. Even today, three years after my retirement, I find pleasure in spending my time in my vast study. So reading helped me to prepare for my lectures and to inspire me to write. Teaching is my wife. Writing is my lady love. Since you are a well-known writer, you may know who gives you more satisfaction in life.

**K.V.Raghupathi:** *You call yourself “a pure entertainer”. Your philosophy is to entertain the readers, you say. Certainly, a sense of humour pervades all your short stories and poems. But one can notice too irony behind it. Why don’t you want to be a serious writer?*

**P.Raja:** By nature I am not a serious fellow. I know we are all puppets in the hands of the Divine. I take life as it comes, because I know it is stupid to react to Fate. When something happens to our eye, it is our hand that rushes to console the eye. But the eye knows that the hand is only a poor comforter. The suffering eye has to stomach the inconvenience. How will one know what joy is unless one is familiar with pain? Pain and suffering form a part and parcel of life only to define joy. Like every other human being I too was attacked by misfortunes. In fact, they came in battalions. But I gave them the jitters through my smile. I have learnt to wink at misfortunes. And so they shy away from me. This is the secret of life. Life itself has taught me this great lesson. No wonder that I try not to show the darker side of life to my readers. I totally disapprove of that stupid theory – “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader”. Whatever meaning is attributed to this theory, my only question is, why should the writer bring tears to the reader’s eyes, when the reader himself is already in tears? Is it not the writer’s duty to bring cheer to the reader’s face? And this is what I am trying to do through my creative writing. “Make the reader happy”. This is my theory. Humour and irony, are Siamese twins. No writer can help in separating one from the other.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *Is your writing a deliberate attempt to avoid the suffering side of human life? Is there anything you are too scared to write about?*

**P.Raja:** Yes, very much. “Know how sublime a thing it is to suffer and be strong”. I think it was Longfellow who said it, and he said it right. Who in this world does not suffer in one way or the other? And I sincerely believe that suffering is sent only to strengthen us. No reader needs P.Raja to tell them of suffering. It is like carrying *laddu* to Tirupathi or coconut oil to Kerala. I will never do it. If readers are interested in serious stuff they know where to go – Swami Vivekananda or Ramakrishna Paramahansa or Sri Aurobindo or Ramana Maharishi or J. Krishnamurti. To be very frank with you, I am scarred of writing about dirty politics. It is not that I plan to write about healthy politics.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *In most writers, one can notice an element of “effort” or “force” in their writings. But, in your case, such an element is not seen. How did you achieve this remarkable felicity in your writings?*

**P. Raja:** As I told you earlier in this interview, I love writing. When love is sown we can definitely reap love. So writing too loves me. It returns what I give it. I believe in the wise saying “To those who give all is given”. I repeat – “Writing is my lady love”.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *How do you deal with writing under pressure?*

**P. Raja:** It is said in Tamil language, that would read somewhat like this in English translation: “A needle vendor should have enough needles to sell”. I always keep many things ready – short stories, poems, essays and all that would go under creative writing. When the demand comes I dash them off to the editors of magazines or newspapers. Assigned pieces are mostly articles and I have no other option but to write them under pressure. By pressure I mean the deadline. I will have to hurry it up, otherwise the chance may go to someone else. I rarely miss such opportunities. I remember to have worked night and day, without rest, to write 37 articles dealing with the culture and history of my native place, all for publication in a special issue of *The Hindu*, on Pondicherry. I started jumping for joy when I saw my name in 37 places of that issue. I slept peacefully after that when I was sure of a big fat cheque. I do not have the guts to say ‘no’ to editors who approach me with all love for my writing.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *What is your stature as a writer at national level?*

**P. Raja:** Any writer would like to get his effusions published without getting rejected. It is true that I collected several rejection slips in the beginning of my writing career. But now the situation has completely changed. No editor says ‘no’ to my writings these days. All the four major city newspapers – New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai – don’t put my pieces in their queue or in their waiting list. The maximum wait may be a week or ten days. When I was in Canada last year with my second son’s family, I was given an opportunity to read my poems in the Canadian Writers’ Forum. I was really surprised to learn from them that many of them knew me by name. They were very happy to see me in flesh and blood. And the writers who came to hear of me for the first time hugged me and said: “Oh, you write in our language!” That speaks of my stature as a writer at international level.

***K.V. Raghupathi: Most writers from the south are marginalized. They are not getting as much exposure and recognition as the writers from the north. How do you react to this observation?***

***P. Raja:*** I was General Council Member of Central Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi on the English Advisory Board from 2008 to 2012 representing Pondicherry University. Perhaps I was the first Tamil to enter the English Board of the Akademi. Sahitya Akademi has published several of my books and continue to send me assignments. Several established publishers from the North like Sterling, B.R. Publishers, D.K.Publishers and Ocean Books have gathered my writings between covers. Several anthologies of Poetry and short stories published from the North continue to include my pieces in them. National Book Trust, New Delhi will be shortly releasing my voluminous work *A Treasury of Ancient Tamil Legends*. I think I am not marginalized. I don't think you are marginalized. Publishers from the North publish your book, I know my dear Raghupathi. Yet some writers from the South feel that they are marginalized. I don't know how to account for this. Perhaps everything has to wait for its time.

***K.V. Raghupathi: Can you recall any remarkable event in your life that has shaped your writings? Which writers do you think have influenced you more?***

***P.Raja:*** When I go down memory lane three great storytellers – my grandma Rajambal, my grandpa Masilamani and my mother Sagunthala – flit through my mind. When I was quite young, good enough to move about on my grandpa's shoulders or on my grandma's hip or in the crook of my mother's arms I listened to excellent stories that have not faded from my memory. What really caught my mind was not only the story but also the way it was narrated. All the Ramayana, Mahabarata and Bagavata stories I have heard from my grandpa and all the folktales I have listened to from my grandma and all the ghost stories that my mother narrated thrilled me to the core. They rarely repeated a story to me unless I wanted to enjoy it again. How many times I had listened to the wit and wisdom of Tenali Rama and Mariyadai Raman, I have lost count. But this trio was perhaps nurturing the not yet born writer in me.

K.D.Sethna, M.P.Pandit, Maggi Lidchi Grassi and Manoj Das – all established writers from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry shaped my writing career. They were all editors of magazines who gave me enough pages to write in every issue. I have made use of their magazines as my exercise notebooks. So naturally, I came under the rule of their cane. I gratefully acknowledge their help in making me what I am today.

***K.V. Raghupathi: You have won several awards and distinctions in your career as a writer. What more do you foresee? Has the writing itself given you self-satisfaction or the awards? What more do you expect in your life?***

***P. Raja:*** Awards...rewards...recognitions...distinctions! I am reminded of Falstaff's words from Shakespeare's play *Henry IV (Part one)*: "What is honour? A word...what is that word? Air. A trim reckoning." That's all. Awards and honours may pat you on the back and incur the wrath of the envious. But the common man who stops you in the fish market and goes on quoting from your poems or praising your narrative skills is the real award. I always think that I have just

started writing and I have a long way to go. This is another excuse to stay on Planet Earth for some more years.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *Right now, what are your ventures? What are you working on? As a writer how you look ahead?*

**P. Raja:** Four of my books, all creative writing, are in the pipeline of publishers. I have just completed writing three novels. Several projects are on my anvil. My dream project ‘Encyclopaedia Pondicherriana’ in five volumes is nearing completion. I have just started writing ‘A Literary History of Pondicherry’ which I am sure is going to be a very voluminous work. I continue with my regular columns only to shape them into books at a later date. After my retirement, and that was three years ago, I became a professional writer.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *What is the hardest thing about being a writer?*

**P. Raja:** When I am at work I skip even my dinner. I say ‘no, not today’ to my good friends who would like to chat with me on the promenade of the beach. I shut the door of my study on my grandchildren who very much like to make a playground of my study. I feel bad for them once my work is completed. But the joy of finishing a work is quite an experience. But the pain of seeing my friends and grandchildren go cross with me is a real painful experience.

**K.V. Raghupathi:** *What is the question you would most like to be asked, but never have been?*

**P. Raja:** “When are you going to stop writing?”

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**Dr. P. Raja:** A son of Pondicherry, famed for its spiritual heritage, P. Raja writes in his chosen language, English, and also in his mother tongue, Tamil. More than 3000 of his works - poems, short stories, interviews, articles, book reviews, plays, skits, features and novellas - have seen the light through newspapers and magazines that number to 300 in both India and elsewhere. He has written and published over thirty books in his writing career spanning over four decades that include six poetry collections, four short story collections, one full-length play, five one-act plays, three folk tale collections, two books on history of Pondicherry besides six translated works from Tamil to English, three books on biography, one autobiography and four edited volumes. Apart from contributing special articles to Encyclopaedia of Post-Colonial Literature in English (London), Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature in English, and to several other edited volumes, he has also written scripts for Television (Delhi). He regularly broadcasts his short stories and poems from All India Radio, Pondicherry. He is a recipient of several awards that include International Eminent Poet Award in 1988 (Chennai), Michael Madhusudan Academy Award in 1991 (Kolkata), Best Poem of the Year Award in 2002 (Una Poesisa Per La Vita, Italy), Academy of Indo-Asian Literature Award in 2003 (Delhi), Lifetime Achievement Award (International Poets Academy, Inter Continental) and Rock Pebbles Award for Creativity (Odisha, 2013).

Born on October 07, 1952 at Olandai-Keerapalayam, a village in Pondicherry Raja graduated in English Literature from Tagore Arts College, and then moved to Annamalai University (Tamil Nadu) for his post-graduation. He holds a Ph.D. degree from Madras University. A voracious reader from his college days, he began his writing career when he was barely twenty-four. A book-reviewer and translator for a start, he wielded his pen in all genres of literature and consistently continues to be so.

**Dr.K.V. Raghupathi:** writes only in English. He is a poet, short story writer, novelist, book reviewer and critic. An Indian author best known for his poetry in English language. His poetry is rooted in the abundance of philosophy, nature, transcendentalism, imagery and social perspectives, and replete with similes, metaphors, personifications, apostrophe, irony, climax, anti-climax and full of rhetoric and symbols. More often he takes the readers on the spiritual exploration of radical philosophical thoughts which strongly speak through all the collections.

Born in a Telugu speaking family in AP hereceived Post-graduate degree in English Literature and Ph.D. in 1979 and 1997 from Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati. He holds PGDTE from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

He began writing seriously in 1985. Since then he has published ten books in English Verse, two novels, and two collections of short stories and edited seven critical books. His poems and short stories have appeared in various newspapers like *The Hindu*, *The Statesman*, Print and On-line journals.

His other passions include Karnatic Music, Yoga, Philosophy and Spirituality. Published three books on Yoga and over thirty articles in various cultural journals like *Sri Aurobindp's Action* (Pondicherry), *Vedanta Kesari* (Chennai), *Prabhudda Bharat* (Kolkata), *Education of Yoga* (Hubbali) and *Saptagiri* (Tirupati).

He is a recipient of several awards that include Michael Madhusudhan Dutt Award, Kolkata in 2001, H.D.Thoreau Fellowship, Dhvanyaloka, Mysore in 2000, the best chosen poet for 2003, Poetry Society of India, New Delhi Poetry Chain, Mumbai, Life Time Achievement Award, Chennai Poetry Circle, Chennai in 2010, Rock Pebbles National Award for Creativity, 2014, Bhubaneswar, besides the Best Yoga Research Publication Award, 2018 and Lifetime Achievement Award in Yoga (2018), New Delhi.

Currently he is teaching in the department of English Studies, Central University of Tamil Nadu, Thiruvarur – 610005.