

Experience is the Ingredient

- Prof. Rowena
Hill

Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy was born in 1954, in a small town in Karnataka State, South India. In spite of his underprivileged origin, he achieved an education which culminated in two Master's degrees, one in commerce and other in the literature of his native language, Kannada. He is an officer of the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation, and has become widely known as an important poet of the new generation in Kannada. He has published 18 books, 5 of which are poetry collections.

Chinnaswamy belongs to the lowest layer in Hindu society, called in the past "untouchable", because a caste Hindu, especially a Brahmin, who even unintentionally touched a person of that community, considered himself polluted and had to run to take a bath.

The poet himself writes: "It is common in India for a man of low caste to suffer humiliations and insults. As a sensitive person, this affected me intimately. Pain and poverty made a poet of me. When I began to write, I had no other writer as a model; I was a non-academic beginner. However, I was observing attentively the dalit movements that were developing during the seventies in Karnataka, after the style of black literature in USA, and the 'Dalit Panthers' of Maharashtra. I had read some protest poems in Telugu, in translation. I had my own grammar, but experience was the main ingredient. That was why my poetry evaded imitation."

Writers of dalit- "oppressed" – origin can never at any time forget their background and their responsibility toward the suffering people of their communities. A poet such as Chinnaswamy, whose mind is a constant source of images of all kinds and who has an unusual facility for playing with the sounds of his resonant language, will never allow himself to become a poet of pure lyricism and personal feeling. So that the subjects of his poems, which may sometimes seem even too crude, are the poverty of the untouchable peasants and the discriminations practised against them in the villages, or their exploitation, often literally criminal, by "caste" people, or the suffering of mothers watching their children go hungry. Shit, rags, filth, are often centre stage in the poems.

But Chinnaswamy is capable of seeing also the despair of the woman whose husband doesn't satisfy her sexually, or the depth of the relationship between a grandmother and her granddaughter. He plays with aspects of nature, imagining for example the sun and moon as slaves of routine work. He thinks about two neighbours, one Muslim and the other Hindu, who still feel affection for each other in the present day Kashmir. And he reflects on poetry, personifying "her": in one poem he invites her to come down from her sphere of purity and Romantic beauty to walk with him among the most wretched of people and to

learn to sing for her forgotten sons. She has listened to him, and given him the gift of writing those once forbidden songs.