

Professor V. K. Chari

Vinjamuri (Vedanta) Krishnamachari was born into an Orthodox Brahmin family of Tamil origin on 28th November, 1924. The family, affiliated to the Rāmānuja Śrīvaiṣṇava sect settled on the banks of the Godavari now in Andhra Pradesh. Having spent the early years amidst this Vaiṣṇava community (*agrahara*) in which Sanskrit and Tamil religious poetry was very much taught as a part of this typical South Indian Temple culture, Chari traditionally inherited Sanskrit learning from his forefathers despite his schooling in the local English school. The war and independence came with a sea change in the traditional Indian culture that scattered Chari's family over the five continents and transformed Chari's ancestral home into ruins.

Chari graduated in both Sanskrit and English subsequently post-graduating in English at Banaras Hindu University. The doctoral dissertation that Chari wrote in Banaras was a comparative study of the mysticism of Whitman the American Transcendentalist in the light of Vedanta concepts and doctrines. U.C. Nag and T.R.V. Murty of Banaras along with Mahendranath Sircar of Calcutta were his supervisors. The dissertation was published by the Nebraska University Press under the title *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (1964).

During his professional career Chari joined the Madhya Pradesh Educational Service and taught at the universities of Banaras, New York and Carleton University of Ottawa (Canada), wherefrom he retired in 1994. From comparative literature Chari then shifted to comparative literary theory and aesthetics contributing extensively on theoretical perspectives of the Sanskrit *Alaṅkāra śāstra* vis-à-vis their Western parallels during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The University of Hawaii Press published Chari's *Sanskrit Criticism* in 1990 that offers his comprehensive views on aspects of Sanskrit rhetorics where, he says, he finds his moorings. Apart from his contributions to different scholarly organs of international repute such as *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Adyar Library Bulletin*, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, Chari has been serving as an active member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* since its inception. Along with this illustrious intellectual pursuit Professor Chari has been a performing artist, an amateur dancer of the famous South Indian styles named Kathakali, Kuchipudi and Perini (Śiva dance), playing roles in Sanskrit dramas staged before the University and learned's conferences in Canada. Dancing continues to be a passion for Chari even today.

Chari writes:

My studies in the ancient Sastras gave me a standpoint that I could defend and from which I could evaluate my acquired Western critical culture.

Viewing from this vantage point, I am not only convinced of the absolute sanity of the classical culture—shared by both Indian and Western traditions—but I find that much of what is going on in the world of art and art criticism today is a distraction and an aberration, and one that is inspired by the modern penchant for “making it new,” as a result of which what is elemental and what is of perennial value is being lost sight of and an all-round dehumanization is taking place. But I yet believe that those of us who uphold the traditional classical norms must continue to hold to their own, even at the cost of being dubbed reactionaries, and not allow ourselves to be intimidated into submission.

When asked about his specific world view, Chari answers:

You ask me what my world view is. But I have none of any positive value. I believe that no world view, doctrine or philosophy of life is worth entertaining, in that every doctrine is a dogma and every view, just that—a *dr̥ṣṭi* or *ditti*. In this I am with the *Nāsadiya Sūkta* of the Ṛg Veda: “Who really knows? Who can tell when even the gods in heaven do not know!” We can at best bear witness to what goes on around and what goes on within ourselves, like the Upanisadic bird. The truth of this will strike you when you consider that nothing about the world will ever change, has ever changed since the time of the Mahābhārata—we still fight the same battles and are driven by the same passions. For all we know, we may be headed for the Yugaṅta! All our strivings—repeated endlessly over the aeons—and all our millennial visions “are such stuff as dreams are made of.”