

Unveiling The Cultural Tapestry: Interpreting The Images Of Suburban South Indian Communities In K.S. Venkataramani's Paper Boats

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Abstract:

Venkataramani has penned down three remarkable essays that have garnered significant attention. These essay collections, namely Paper Boats, The Next Rung and Renascent India, have captivated readers with their insightful perspectives and thought-provoking content. Each of these essays offers a unique glimpse into various aspects of society, leaving a lasting impact on the readers. His insights and wit will resonate with future generations and transcend time. Although the subject matter, form, and tone of these writings differ significantly, Venkataramani's esteemed position in intellectual discourse would remain unchanged even if he had only contributed his sketches and essays. Through these concise literary creations, the erudite author expresses his perspectives on politics, peasant life, and the challenges confronting Indian society with unparalleled creativity and clarity. Nevertheless, in Renascent India, he anticipates that the emerging spirit will prompt humanity to recognise that "material progress is only the scaffolding for the raising of a beautiful structure for the soul" (2). The present paper explores the images of Suburban South Indian Communities in K.S. Venkataramani's Paper Boats and the author's commendable commitment to transparency and objectivity.

Keywords: Transcend, Unparalleled Creativity, Emerging Spirit, Material Progress, Suburban.

Introduction

Venkataramani's literary legacy is exceptional, consisting of two volumes of essays and lighthearted sketches that testify to his unwavering dedication to intellectual discourse and artistic expression. Paper Boats showcases the author's remarkable ability to observe his surroundings keenly, with a delightful sense of humour and a deep understanding of human nature. This collection of stories also exhibits his capacity for evoking pathos, sympathy, and a genuine

connection with his readers. The evidence of his vivacious optimism and zeal for spiritual, cultural, and political advancement and freedom from oppression of all people is undeniable. Rather than evading or distorting the core challenges at hand, the author engages in a sincere exploration of these concerns and offers genuine suggestions for potential solutions.

Paper Boats is a captivating collection of ten exquisite sketches that offer a poignant glimpse into the enchanting world of South Indian rural life and its vibrant inhabitants. As the collection title suggests, each sketch is a delicate masterpiece that effortlessly captures the essence of this idyllic setting. In his captivating collection of sketches, Venkataramani takes readers on a vivid journey to a quaint village, immersing them in its rich cultural tapestry. With these intriguing sketches, the author skillfully transports us to this charming locale, inviting us to partake in its vibrant traditions and way of life. This literary debut marks Venkataramani's foray into storytelling, leaving a lasting impression on readers with his evocative imagery and immersive narrative. The collection of essays presented in this work showcases a series of beautifully crafted vignettes, each displaying a remarkable level of expertise. The simplicity and inherent humanity portrayed in these sketches contribute to their overall appeal. Paper Boats showcases his ability to capture the essence of rural life, reaffirming his identity as a villager rather than a townsman. Building upon the themes explored in his previous works, the author delves into the intricacies of village existence, offering readers a glimpse into a world often overlooked in literature. Through his vivid storytelling and authentic portrayal of characters, Venkataramani continues to establish himself as a master. "The first paper boat that Venkataramani sets asail has ""The Indian Beggar" as its occupant" (Gupta 53). As Anniah Gowda, in his *Fiction and the Reading Public in India*, observes, ""The Indian Beggar", perhaps for the first time in Indo-English fiction, is given a status" (53).

In the captivating sketch titled "The Indian Beggar," the author presents a thought-provoking analysis of the intricate nature of the beggar's craft. In addition, the author acquaints the reader with various types of beggars. In a delightful showcase of Venkataramani's unique blend of humour and poignancy, this sketch effortlessly captures the essence of the artist's creative vision. With a keen eye for detail and a masterful command of storytelling, Venkataramani skillfully weaves together elements of wit and emotional depth, leaving audiences both amused and moved. In his insightful piece, Venkataramani acquaints readers with the intriguing world of Indian beggars, shedding light on the seven distinct categories within this socio-economic group. The 'Beggar with the Bowl' is a loudmouth. "He trusts to his lungs to attract attention" (2). 'The Beggar with the Monkey and the Dog' has gained significant recognition as one of the most renowned beggars. Known for his exceptional ability to captivate and amuse large audiences, he has earned the title of a true master in the realm of entertainment. With his remarkable antics and unparalleled showmanship, he has successfully won over the hearts of the masses. In pursuing financial gain, he has honed the skill of tapping into parents' wallets by leveraging their children. He holds a firm disbelief in the institution of marriage. In certain circumstances, he exhibits an

unwavering determination to engage in acts of robbery without any hesitation and “heaves only a sigh of relief when put in prison” (3).

Seeing the beggar accompanied by a snake is both disheartening and deeply unsettling. In a captivating display reminiscent of his renowned composition ‘Magadi’, the artist skillfully orchestrates a mesmerising performance with his serpent companion. Despite its weakened state, the snake gracefully sways to the enchanting melody, simultaneously aiding its master in the collection of currency. According to popular belief, it is widely speculated that the renowned deity, Lord Vishnu, has been afflicted by the Adishesha curse, resulting in his inability to conceive offspring. Throughout his life, he has never had the opportunity to experience true happiness. One of the most intriguing figures in beggars is known as ‘The Gipsy Beggar’. Renowned for their exceptional ability to discern people and objects, this man stands out as a paragon of creativity in their chosen profession. In his pursuit of captivating people with his uncanny abilities, he assumes the roles of both a palmist and an astrologer. Through his craft, he skillfully weaves a tapestry of optimistic predictions, leaving his audience in awe. Regarding the art of begging, ‘The Beggar with the Bull’ stands out with a distinctively regal approach, setting them apart from their gipsy counterparts. When selecting handouts, one particular type stands out for him - old clothing. During his daily activities, he is invariably accompanied by his trusty trained bull. He is the wealthiest of the beggars and enjoys the “fairest products of Mother Earth – Women and wine” (8). Among Indian Beggars, “The Musical Mendicant” receives the best treatment. “He fills the ear with the string-born melody of purest rapture . . . It is the breath of youth and hunger playing on the lyre of life – for a handful of rice in regulated parsimony, or a few copper coins” (9). His songs become sadder and sweeter as the hunger grows. The only food “The Nocturnal Beggar” will accept is prepared food. He misappropriates Hindu doctrine: “Who knows whether we may live yet another day to mend our soul. Sleep may be death” (11).

The sketch presents a captivating personal account that delves into the world of begging in India. In a sarcastic tone, Venkataramani expresses, “The liberated souls of the great apostles of Love all over the world are born again as valiant beggars. For, where is the teacher who is not anxious to test the effect of his lessons?” (12). The essay seemingly adopts a sympathetic stance towards beggars, conveying a sense of apology. In the author’s compelling narrative, a resounding call to embrace a spirit of tenacity and initiative resonates deeply. With an unwavering determination, people are encouraged to navigate the complexities of life and find purpose amidst the myriad challenges they may encounter. In life’s journey, people often face numerous challenges and adversities that demand our unwavering resilience and composure. With a knack for comedic timing and clever wit, the author effortlessly weaves together a tapestry of laughter and entertainment. His lighthearted approach to storytelling creates a delightful reading experience: “the strong current of poetry that runs through the essay elevates the drab subject to a heightened dignity which somehow reminds us of Charles Lamb” (Gupta 64).

In his second essay, titled “On Fishermen,” Venkataramani provides a poignant and insightful account of the courageous and arduous lives led by fishermen. In their serene existence, far removed from the cunning intricacies of contemporary society, the fishermen lead a tranquil existence characterised by harmony and moral uprightness. In the realm of Hinduism, there exists a group that has often been overlooked and neglected, yet they can be considered as the unsung apostles of this ancient religion. In their pursuit of a modest existence, these individuals embrace a lifestyle characterised by simplicity, remaining unfazed by the unpredictable nature of both climate and fate. They firmly adhere to the principle of earning sustenance through arduous and precarious work. One aspect that fills them with pride is their hereditary vocation. Religious festivals and wedding ceremonies are events that fill them with boundless excitement. Temple cars hold a significant place in the cultural and religious traditions of many villages. These magnificent structures, adorned with intricate carvings and vibrant colours, transport deities during religious processions and festivals. While the temple cars themselves are awe-inspiring, it is the fishermen who pull them that truly embody heroism. In the neighbouring villages, some people take on the noble responsibility of pulling these temple cars. With unwavering dedication and immense physical strength, they navigate through the bustling streets, manoeuvring the massive structures with precision and grace. These people, often called pullers, industrious, innocent, and strong, diligently maintain their purity amidst the corrupting influences of the civilised society.

In this captivating sketch, the author demonstrates a profound understanding and sympathetic portrayal of the lives of fishermen, evoking a sense of admiration as well. The influence of the Romantics of England is apparent in his work, particularly in his vivid portrayal of the sea. Living in close contact with the sea, fishermen have a unique and intimate relationship with one of the primal elements of nature. Living in this manner allows them to distance themselves from the more refined society of their neighbourhood, thereby aiding in the preservation of their innocence and the conservation of their unique way of life. In a manner reminiscent of Thoreau’s call to seek solace and spiritual growth in the depths of the forest, Venkataramani’s words echo a similar sentiment, urging us to embrace the admirable and untainted existence of the fishermen.

In his essay “Village Cricket,” Venkataramani provides readers with a vivid portrayal of the idyllic rendition of a quintessentially English sport. The English counterpart is known for its fastidious rules, but this language is free from such constraints. Cricket, a sport that has captivated millions worldwide can be traced back to its origins as a product of the Aryan genius. In essence, village cricket represents a localised adaptation of this beloved game. In sports, the rural game stands apart from its sophisticated counterparts, offering a refreshing escape from monotony. Unlike its more refined counterparts, this game provides every participant with the opportunity to both bat and bowl, ensuring an inclusive and engaging experience for all. There is an undeniable air of romance surrounding it. One notable advantage of this particular aspect is the presence of

an additional incentive. The players find themselves motivated by the adoring smiles bestowed upon them by enchanting maidens who gracefully cross their paths.

The concise sketch is replete with language reminiscent of the prose found in the works of the Romantic poets. The entirety of the composition flows with grace and rhythm akin to that of a poetic verse. Expressions like “the wayward buoyancy and mirth of the evening breeze” (22) and “the rippling laughter of girls carrying home pails of water at the hip” (22) lend the sketch its peculiar poetic charm. In the captivating narrative presented by the author, the essay consistently succeeds in entertaining its readers. In his next artistic endeavour, Venkataramani presents a remarkable piece titled “The Hindu Temple,” which can be described as a true masterpiece of the word ‘painting’. The composition appears to have been crafted with a sense of inspiration. With a rare combination of insight and devotion, the artist skillfully captures the charm and significance of the various aspects of the ‘Hindu temple’ in this sketch.

The Hindu Temple, he points out, is “the emblem of the religious life of an Indian village and the inspirer of all the qualities inherent in the ‘Hindu’” (2). It urges the Hindu to lead a virtuous life and acts as “the cornerstone of his orthodoxy, the bedrock of his piety” (22). The symbol of man’s religious instinct and appreciation for beauty can be succinctly encapsulated. The allure of village life is undeniably strong, drawing people towards its idyllic charm and simplicity. In this sacred place, the presiding deity is revered as the embodiment of ‘Love and Service’. The Hindu temple is a remarkable architectural triumph, characterised by its grand and spacious design. The majestic gopuram, with its pyramid-like structure and solid foundations, stands tall as a testament to the magnificence of Indian architecture. The Hindu temple, serving as a symbol of unified worship, is “the supreme exponent of the oneness of man in the service of God, be he a Brahmana or a Pariah” (31).

In Venkataramani’s depiction of the ‘presiding deity’ known as ‘The Ambal’, his astute powers of observation are evident. He skillfully describes the presence of the ‘minor gods’ meticulously arranged in rows along the colonnades. In his depiction of the Chandikesvarar - a stubborn and contrary entity - the author’s use of subtle humour adds a delightful charm to his portrayal. “He acknowledges nothing but a sincere clap of hands, which incidentally serves to relieve him of a cluster of frightened lizards which creep slimily over him” (29). Venkataramani almost breaks forth into lyrical rapture when he describes the ‘temple car’:

However, the crowning glory of the ‘Hindu temple’ is the celebrated car. It is a dream in timber which bridges Heaven and Earth. It is the stateliest projection of the Hindu mind. It is the pillar of our pictorial life. It is the rallying-point of all castes and creeds . . . The car is an imposing pile of timber carved into all the exquisite images known to Hindu architecture. (30 – 31)

In his following essay, titled “My Little Arunalam”, Venkataramani articulates his deep social concern and provides a poignant and vivid depiction of the developmental journey of a Harijan child, shedding light on the treatment of untouchables in pre-Independence India. Born in a ‘paracheri’, Arunalam becomes a cowherd at seven. He continues to be so till ten. He finds cattle “kinder and more grateful than men” (34). Then, he becomes a worker in the fields. He is denied education. He is “as unlettered as Vayu and Varuna – the primal elements of Nature” (37). He is the secret of the agricultural prosperity of his master. “Himself clad in a loin cloth, he clothes by the unremitting labour of his hand the bare universe around in one mantle of green” (37).

The sketch presented is genuinely poignant, as it vividly portrays the author’s deep empathy towards Arunalam, an uneducated individual belonging to the untouchable caste. It also sheds light on the dire circumstances faced by the entire tribe and the cruel exploitation they endure due to their lack of knowledge and vulnerability perpetrated by the landlords. Sentences like “The raptures of his life are the varieties of a fixed orbit of labour even as the diurnal rounds of the earth (37) and “The sorrows of his life are only his master’s regulated parsimony of a Madras measure of paddy” (37) naturally make one feel that the British domination of India was perhaps not so disgusting as the suppression of the untouchables by the privileged beneficiaries of a deliberately fabricated system of social domination.

In a thought-provoking analysis, Harrex, in his *The English Language Novel of India*, delves into the striking parallels between Venkataramani’s depiction of a social outcast in “My Little Arunalam” and Mulk Raj Anand’s portrayal in “Untouchable.” By examining these two literary works, Harrex sheds light on the shared experiences and challenges faced by individuals marginalised by society.

Both writers are socially exceptional in their intense sympathy for the Pariah and their perception of his humanity. However, the reality of Arunalam as an individual and of his experiences as an outcast is ignored. Arunalam is an extension of the author’s sympathy lost in a haze of idealised romantic rusticity . . .Anand, on the other hand, reveals the hideous ‘actuality . . . underlying the so called varieties of a fixed orbit of labour ...’ He also portrays caste in terms of the subjective experience through the eyes of Bakha the central character in *Untouchable*. (74)

Venkataramani’s style has seamlessly incorporated subtle humour, which manifests itself even in his heartfelt descriptions. The author’s keen awareness of the dire circumstances faced by this impoverished child is evident, yet their unique sense of humour adds an unexpected twist. In a rather unconventional manner, the child’s distress is portrayed as a source of amusement, with the author describing their cries as ‘lusty’ and even finding a melodious quality that resonates with the parents. “The moment he knew how to crawl out of the cradle, he had to face the problem of

living. Neither the sword would he wield nor, much less, the pen. Moreover, in the wake of Shri Krishna, he begins with the stick of the cowherd – the symbol of his first sovereignty” (34).

Venkataramani’s remarkable talent for seamlessly blending humour and pathos is evident in many passages. These examples provide a glimpse into the vast array of his literary prowess. In this captivating little sketch, the artist skillfully combines two elements to create a flawless blend. In the essay “The Hindu Pilgrim,” Venkataramani explores the concept of pilgrimage by depicting two distinct types of pilgrims: the perpetual and the periodic. In the realm of spiritual exploration, the convergence of divinity and humanity finds its culmination in the figure of the pilgrim. This sacred encounter between God and man is a profound merging of two realms, where the boundaries between the mortal and the divine become blurred. The pilgrim, in their quest for enlightenment and transcendence, embarks on a transformative journey that leads them to the very essence of their being. The concept of the perpetual pilgrim revolves around the eternal search for God, which remains a constant pursuit in all places and at all times. The pilgrim can be described as a restless wanderer. In a remarkable display of devotion, he embarks on a spiritual journey, traversing from one sacred site to another, completely surrendering himself to the divine presence of God. One of his greatest pleasures is experiencing a profound sense of rapture and revelation. The experience can be described as a harmonious blend of aesthetics and spirituality. The temples’ picturesque architecture has a profound appeal that touches the heart, while the darshan of God evokes a deep stirring within the soul. The concept of the periodic pilgrim revolves around one who, as a respectable householder, embarks on occasional pilgrimages. They understand the significance of undertaking sacred journeys and consciously try to incorporate them into their lives. By engaging in these pilgrimages, they seek to deepen their spiritual connection and gain a deeper understanding of their faith. The periodic pilgrim is characterised by their commitment to balancing their household responsibilities with their desire for spiritual growth through these occasional pilgrimages “for purposes of expiation or the acquisition of extra religious merit” (41).

Venkataramani’s overall attitude towards these pilgrims is characterised by reverence. However, upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that his perspective towards the periodic pilgrims is not as respectful as that of the perpetual pilgrim. In a delightful display of wit and cleverness, Venkataramani elicits a smile from us as he gently pokes fun at the occasional pilgrim. With a touch of sarcasm and a hint of humour, he skillfully crafts his words to bring levity to the situation. “He always goes out on a pilgrimage with wife and children, and also some poor relations. It is the injunction of the ‘Smrithis’ not to neglect poor relations – and they may be helpful on the way!” (42). This testifies his gentle sarcasm and understanding of the human nature of exploitation.

In addition to showcasing Venkataramani’s artistic talent, this sketch also serves as a testament to his deep-rooted faith in Hinduism and the profound impact it has had on his life. In his perspective, people believe that pilgrimages should be embarked upon, primarily due to their

revitalising impact on one's well-being. He holds a deep admiration for the sadhu, a spiritual ascetic who dedicates his time to an ashram, diligently imparting wisdom to followers regarding the profound principles of Hinduism. Remeshwar, a place of enchantment and wonder, is adorned with many poetic images that captivate the imagination. "The endless waste of sands without man-murmur, and the endless waste of water without sea-murmur fills the mind with a sense of the Divine and the universal" (42). The origins of Wordsworth's celebrated pantheism can be traced back to this sacred land. In the literary work "My Grandmother," Venkataramani provides readers with a vivid portrayal of the Hindu joint family system. The author reflects upon the remarkable qualities of his beloved grandmother. This wise and revered matriarch leads an active and fulfilling life as "an unceasing control over a joint family of a dozen adult members" (44). From the first rays of dawn until the last glimmers of twilight, her presence permeates every nook and cranny of the household. She possesses a solid adherence to traditional beliefs and practises, displaying a notable disdain towards the aspirations and rebellious tendencies of the younger generation. According to the author, "the Hindu joint family is the most democratic and the best-governed in the world". It is the very model of an ordered and religious life, the source of all that is pious and pure in the daily life of the Hindu" (46-47).

Venkataramani possesses a profound understanding of the illustrious heritage associated with the Hindu joint family system. Simultaneously, he remains keenly aware of the subtle messages conveyed by the written words on the wall. He possesses a deep understanding of the potential demise of the joint family structure, as it is increasingly susceptible to the influence of the progressive mindset prevalent among the younger generation. In concluding remarks, the author expresses his heartfelt desire: "May at least its immortal Fragrance live forever in the memory of man" (49).

The literary work entitled "My Neighbour" provides a vivid portrayal of a Brahmin individual who, despite attaining commendable achievements in his chosen vocation, elects to embark upon the path of a sanyasi in order to distance himself from the incessant vexations imposed upon him by his spouse and the recalcitrant behaviour exhibited by his offspring. The sketch aptly portrays how the enterprising individuals hailing from the Indian subcontinent managed to garner the approval and support of the British Raj. It is only through diligent and arduous efforts that individuals can attain advancements within the bureaucratic hierarchy. Pitchu Sastri, a sagacious Brahmin, demonstrates remarkable resilience as he ascends from the humble position of a clerk to the esteemed rank of Deputy Tahsil, all amidst a backdrop of challenging circumstances. However, the protagonist's spouse, an exceptional individual characterised by her assertive and spirited nature, disrupts his tranquillity of thought and intellectual prowess, ultimately compelling him to relinquish his domestic abode and embark on a spiritual journey as a sanyasi. The essay exhibits the discernible attributes of a gentle form of satire. It elucidates how people of Indian descent, due to their lack of knowledge or awareness, were subjected to acts of terror perpetrated by Indian Revenue Officials, who were, in essence, subservient to the British

Raj. The author's keen sense of humour is abundantly evident in the depiction of the shrew. "She is an excellent housewife and a splendid shrew" (54). He portrays the fate of Deputy Tahsil in these words: "Mr. Pichu is as helpless at home as he is powerful abroad ... (and he) moved out on camp on revenue work whenever he felt hungry beyond endurance" (55).

In the preceding essay, "The Jagat Guru," Venkataramani eloquently documents his profound veneration for Sankara, the esteemed Adi Guru. Furthermore, he provides a fervent and detailed narrative of the 'Kamakoti Peetam'. Sankara, a luminary of unparalleled intellectual prowess, has been bestowed with the epithet of the 'Saviour of Hinduism'. The institution known as the 'Kamakoti Peetam' is among the esteemed establishments dedicated to the dissemination and propagation of the profound teachings of the revered philosopher and theologian Sankara. The nomenclature of the establishment, aptly denoted as "The Throne of the End of Desires," carries significant connotations. The one occupying the esteemed position of Head of the Institution is a Brahmachari, possessing extensive knowledge and proficiency in various Hindu scriptures. He is commonly referred to as an Acharyaswami. In the literary work "Saraswati's Marriage", the final installment within the series of ten paper boats, Venkataramani masterfully presents a charming portrayal wherein he skillfully provides a rich and intricate depiction of Hindu matrimonial ceremonies. The ritual, in its entirety, spans a minimum duration of four days. The event serves the dual purpose of being both a social gathering and a religious function. The profound gravity with which the institution of marriage is commemorated serves as a testament to the sacredness and holiness that it embodies. Venkataramani's preoccupations manifest in a tripartite focus on various facets of Indian existence, namely its agrarian foundation, its fundamentally Hindu ethos, and its disconcerting societal structure. A fervent adherent of Gandhi, he dedicated himself to elucidating the methods by which the lives of Indians may be emancipated and imbued with significance. It appears that he has comprehended the significance of agricultural prosperity in the context of India. Therefore, he expounds upon the noteworthy characteristics of rural existence. The individual's apprehension regarding the deteriorating state of the Hindu way of life motivates him to channel his efforts towards revitalising the Indian populace's engagement with Hinduism. Having originated from an orthodox landed Hindu family, he possesses a profound understanding of the ignominy endured by the Harijans due to the actions of the caste Hindus. As an individual engaged in writing, he experiences a profound inclination to eradicate the pernicious phenomenon of untouchability within the Indian social milieu. The entirety of his concerns are eloquently manifested within these sketches. The essays, namely "The Indian Beggar," "On Fishermen," and "My Little Arunalam," serve as compelling evidence that the writer exhibits a profound preoccupation with the societal affliction of the impoverished being subjected to the dominance of the affluent. Furthermore, the author subtly alludes to the potential societal breakdown that could arise as a consequence of the peculiar caste structure that is pervasive in India. However, the individual articulates his apprehensions, anxieties, and compassion using a subdued manner of expression. Consequently, he cannot project the image of an impassioned revolutionary despite the possibility that deep down, he may possess such inclinations. For India to attain its freedom,

the collective prowess of all societal segments must be harnessed. Consequently, it is incumbent upon us not to overlook the plight of these vulnerable and uneducated individuals, who indeed form a formidable power. The sketches possess a notable characteristic worthy of recognition, namely their uncomplicated, clear, and impactful style. The narrative exhibits a seamless and fluid progression akin to the pristine and transparent flow of a crystal-clear stream. Venkataramani's astute observation is commendable, as he diligently processes any information that crosses his path, utilising it as valuable nourishment for his intellectual endeavours. He adeptly veils their expressions of dissent within a cloak of gentle amusement, thereby avoiding the provocation of any adversaries. He possesses a level of engagement comparable to that of Gardiner, Lucas, and Lamb. Several decades ago, Venkataramani initiated his literary expedition, setting forth to release his diminutive paper vessels onto the expansive ocean of literature.

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