



Raj Karamchedu published his debut novel, *All Things Unforgiven*, in 2014 through his own publishing house, Saaranga Books. The publishing house is his way of bringing to fruition his vision that literature of the Indian Diaspora is rich, inclusive, diverse, and supportive of underrepresented voices.

Saaranga was born in 2010 — in collaboration with husband-and-wife poets Kalpana Rentala and Afsar — out of Karamchedu's work translating Telugu poetry and realizing how South Indian literature and writers are largely unheard in the United States. Two years ago, they also began publishing *Saaranga*, a weekly literary magazine that encourages voices from women and stories and essays written in localized Telugu dialect. To date there are more than a thousand entries, including fiction, memoirs, translations, poetry, and more, on the site.

Karamchedu's *All Things Unforgiven* is an example of the kind of work that deserves more space and a bigger presence in the literary world. It revolves around a South Indian family living in contemporary Hyderabad but navigating the complexities of old traditions. His portrait of family life does not follow a typical old-versus-new story common in Indian literature; he delves into the individual psyches of his characters, the acts of violence both large and small become embedded into their day-to-day lives, and how their relationships — which often possess a complexity that is denied or silenced in the culture they live in — take a toll on their destinies. In particular, Arya, the protagonist, starts as a young boy who witnesses intimately the dysfunction between his parents as well as religious conflict in his village, and grows into a deeply flawed and troubled man for whom the reader can't help but find empathy for. He is relatable despite his brutality, compelling despite his ugliness. That is in fact his beauty. Ultimately, Arya's is a fundamentally human story that goes beyond the Diaspora.

You grew up in Hyderabad, which is the setting of a part of your novel. What brought you to the US?

I was born and raised in Hyderabad, a southern Indian city, in a middle-class family. In Hyderabad, there's the old city and the new city, and I'm from Old Hyderabad. This area has a very wonderful mix of Muslim and Hindu culture — you see a lot of *minars* and masjids and temples, so you don't really think there's any difference between the various communities and religions and whatnot.

I came out here for my graduate studies at Michigan Tech in 1991 and had no idea that I'd be writing anything at all. I was just a regular student going to grad school. My dream was to do some research in artificial neuro networks; it's kind of a field that focuses on developing computing based on how the brain works. I got my masters degree and realized quickly that there are no jobs in that sector! So, I went to California and have been living there since then.

It was only after 2000 that I started to show serious interest in writing or literary pursuits.

How did your upbringing — Brahmin, etc — factor into the writing you do? I know your poetry translation has to do with caste politics a little. Can you talk about this?

Personally, I was not aware that caste played so much of a role in my life. But growing up, as you develop a greater



IN THE SEARCH OF NEW VOICES

Author-publisher Raj Karamchedu tells Chaya Babu about his mission to bring unknown South Indian writing to people, to find a way to make the experiences of Indian characters universal

consciousness about your identity and your place in the world, you start to realize, 'I probably would have known more about different people or different sections of society, different castes, if I didn't belong to the Brahmin caste, or if I didn't have this sort of an upbringing.'

A lot of that knowledge is really coming from your friends and the world around you when you step out of your family. I mean you don't have that kind of an open-minded environment when you're born and raised in that caste; that's the very limitation of caste... You as an individual might end up having a lucky break in developing that maturity.

When did you become more conscious in this way?

I don't know when, but it came through some indirect means. It came through my stepping out of India. I think

this was a big factor. It allows you to look back and look at what people are saying about India and how the caste system is riddled with conflicts, chauvinistic attitudes, old traditions. Sometimes (*you feel*) that these customs and mindsets that you grew up with (*are*) being misinterpreted or misunderstood, but sometimes you feel like, 'Maybe, you know, they're not being misunderstood, this is the way they are and they have no place in the way we should live our lives these days'...

Growing up that way, you don't think about it. You think that's just the way it is. But then after you come out of it, you start to think that that may be the root of many other ways of creating divisions in society and giving preferential treatment to one versus another group. Still, I know plenty of people who were able to see Indian society through this lens without leaving.

It sounds like this critical lens influenced your desire to start your own publishing house in the US...

The very first thing that motivated me, and this was in 2010, was that there seemed to be no new voices out there — or I wasn't discovering new voices out there — who could speak with as much, I guess you would say, quality or passion as you would perhaps expect from a language-diverse culture like India.

Let me be more specific. If you've lived here long enough and read books, you're used to seeing a variety of approaches to literature, through different kinds of fiction and narrative and the stories of people coming from different walks of life, especially women or other minorities. There are some really eminent authors representing marginalized voices, but I did not see that when I looked at the landscape of literary works in India, especially South India and even more particularly in Telugu literature. I was very disappointed that whatever's out there is still sort of this tabloid and popular literature, very cheap paperbacks.

Also the culture was such that even though there is a wealth of writers, publishers aren't interested in them. It's a strange thing to see — in South India, or in general in India, if you are a new writer or if you're not super duper popular, you have to pay to get published. I didn't like that... Forget about giving them royalties and support; you have to at least not take money from writers to get their books published. I was offended that we're doing this to writers, especially in the region where I come from. I wanted to at least provide an alternative to people who have no other way. I'm not going to ask them for anything; I'm just going to go out and seek new voices. To the extent that I can afford it and I can do it, I'll do my

part.

Additionally we started a weekly online magazine, *Saaranga*. This has been remarkable in that it appears that in the Telugu-speaking world, this magazine has gained a lot of respectability. It's seen as a serious approach to serious literature. That also means that it's diverse, it gives voice to underrepresented people in society — not just from the ethnic minority point of view, but more importantly, the speakers of lesser-known styles and dialects of a particular language... We discovered from starting this magazine that there are localized literary traditions based in different communities. We were very thrilled to learn that.

Since we gained traction about six months ago, *Saaranga* has seemed to be a source for new writer discovery.

Is Telugu or South Indian literature overall left out of the broader space of Indian Diasporic writing in the US?

Completely. Totally. Within India itself it's totally underrepresented. When I read books in Telugu, my native language, I think, 'Wow, this is in par with anything I read by Western authors,' so I thought maybe I could give it a shot and bring the unknown South Indian writing to people. I'd like to find a way to make these experiences (*of Indian characters*) universal, to communicate in a way that makes people understand that they are universal, especially South Indian characters. Just because there's a South Indian protagonist, that doesn't mean it's an alien experience or alien



► M5

culture. You can make it into that, exoticize it. You can throw in 15 spices and another 10 kinds of flowers plus the smells of South India, but then you have a brochure for a travel company, an advertisement. That's not really how you feel if you live there. If you're born and raised in New York City, you don't have the same kind of fascination with the city as an outsider would. You're a native person — you ought to have a lot more of a grounded feeling in the place, an intimate relationship with it.

Do you feel there was a very narrow Indian narrative that's put forth in mainstream publishing?

Yes, there's a lot of stereotyping that goes on, but I don't see that as anyone's fault. I think that everything that comes to the surface has to be very easily touchable and accessible; if you have a stereotype, it's easy to grasp. If you have an oily-haired person coming from South Asia, that's an easy image to visualize. But if you want to dig deeper into how the person feels, if you have an image of a brown-skinned person, a human being has a very difficult time getting past that and reaching into that person's psyche or emotional state.

Not discriminating is an acquired skill; it doesn't come naturally. But great societies make that a part of life, helping everybody acquire that skill. I think part of growing up in India is that no one acquires this; no one has a humanistic approach. It's almost like if you imagine things in a rack where every item has its place; people living in India are like these items and everyone accepts that and doesn't feel like they should want to jump up to the top rack. I wanted to sort of get away from all this because the character I was trying to develop required pulling him from inside out.

I certainly don't see myself as a caricature or stereotype of a culture or race or caste. Most often when I read a character like that, by Indian writers writing in English, I feel disdain and I feel very bored it. It's too much generalization. I'm more interested in characters who are the product of a culture but also have an inner life, and if you show that inner life, you're not subtracting that culture. You're not dismissing that Indianness. You're just showing it from inside out — in a more complex way with greater depth.

That's true for how you created Arya in your novel. How did you develop him? Does your personal experience inform his character?

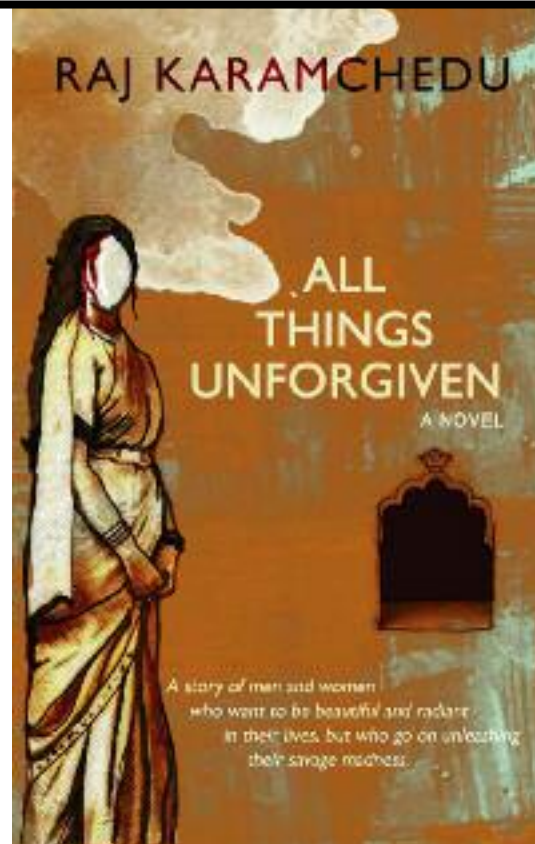
Yes. Maybe I should say that the impulse to write the book — or to write the book this way — really came from when I was 24 or 25. I started to become more and more sensitive to secrets, or what I thought were the secrets that men have in their heads. By that I mean that, growing up as a male in Indian society, there are so many things you experience and do — like sometimes maybe you're an abuser, maybe you're a molester, maybe you're the creator of all these things that another part of your brain is looking at and saying, 'Well that's not right.'

I think in general, when it comes to the idea of a man, especially an Indian man, I see him as riddled with all these conflicting personalities. So I thought I'd take that and go through these varieties of personalities or roles that a man such as Arya would go through or create in others, either by committing acts of violence or simply being a part of the kind of society I've mentioned. I wanted to look at that from the inside out — not to justify it, but in a way to sort of demystify it. It's about understanding first before labeling or judging. And pretty soon this whole storyline came together. I drew from what I saw, especially the communal riots in the Old City and that came from personal memories and experiences.

COURTESY: RAJ KARAMCHEDU



Raj Karamchedu's *All Things Unforgiven* is an example of the kind of work that his publishing house hopes to bring to more readers.



IN THE SEARCH OF NEW VOICES

I think for a lot of people, your first book is based on what you know. I also think part of it is imagination — you extrapolate from what you know and let (*the story that comes from there*) flow into you...

What drove me from beginning to end was thinking that if a reader is reading a particular scene, they should feel exactly how the character feels. If I couldn't get to that emotion when I went back and read a section, then it didn't make the cut.

The book is supposed to bring out the themes of the cultural and moral dilemmas of India. What are these in your opinion? What were you trying to bring out in the story?

I didn't want to sit on the fence anymore; I wanted to come right out and say that, first of all, Telugu culture, or the culture I was born and raised in, is characterized by two or three specific features, one of which is how we treat women or how we don't treat women properly. So, why don't we ever just say this? Why not say that that is a defining trait of this culture: Abuse of women, in a subtle way, in an open way, in implicit and explicit ways.

There's a whole host of characters in society who rally around legitimizing certain forms of that abuse. Other forms of abuse, you're better off not legitimizing them because you want to seem progressive and so forth, but some remain.

I wanted to tie that to modern dilemmas. The dilemma is that you have nowhere else to go but to recognize that you need to change the culture so that people don't feel *forced* not to abuse women and children; it should be natural. It should not be like, 'Hey democracy in Iraq! Wait it doesn't fit! Or maybe it's fitting!' It shouldn't be that kind of thing.

We have to transform society and breathe new air. It may come with its own complications, but fine, we'll deal with that. I think that's the modern dilemma of India.

What are examples of some work that has influenced you?

I find translations of the Old Testament very interesting. Most of the Old Testament stories have characters who are going somewhere or coming from somewhere — I relate to this. I've gone away from home and I still don't feel like I'm home here. I feel homesick. But I can't resolve that just by going back 'home.' So, there's a lot of this existential, immigrant feeling.

'Immigrant' is not just about being an Indian person liv-

ing here; there's a lot more to it. And India is such a diverse place — within India, there are so many immigrants from one state to another, one linguistic experience to another linguistic experience. Sometimes adjacent states don't understand each other's languages, and this can really make people feel like aliens among each other with a simple cross of a thin border, or if some southern guy goes up north. They might not find a defined way to express this feeling because just being Indian covers everything, and wraps it up and makes it all one so you don't know that you feel dislocated, but when you come out here, you do feel dislocated.

I came to feel like these concepts were really important for Arya's character.

You are very invested in gender issues. How does this play out in the work you look to publish through *Saaranga*?

I guess I tend to look for very human, individualized, personal stories that are situated within

one's culture. I'm not too interested in political narratives about social class warfare, but more into the voice of a woman, through all of her various roles in her life, in that particular context.

I'm very interested in a woman's voice, especially from Telugu culture because I know that if you give a woman a way or the freedom to express herself, you will learn a lot more about the culture because they experience so much that is silenced. In general, in South Indian culture, or India overall, they are repressed because of societal pressures and etiquette and norms. It's still a male-dominated chauvinistic society. Even stalwarts and big authors, if they happen to be male, you'd be surprised at how much they fit the 'typical Indian man' mold. The stereotypes can be very true. I just want to break that mold and give voice to more women.

When it comes to the oppression of women, people know about it but sort of act very surprised when you actually call it out explicitly. Also, the majority of atrocities or forms of discrimination and abuse against women is still spoken and written about by men. If a woman opens her mouth, or her pen, and expresses these things and starts to be a little creative about how she feels about it, people get jittery about it. I want to push back on that. I want to see more women writers.

Additionally, and I'm just going to come out and say this, Indian culture is a sexually repressed culture. From what I've seen, women writers seem to be a lot freer and bolder. I actually think it's men who internalize this repression more negatively than women. I wonder if we create an open space for women, their writing on sexuality and gender ideals and how they experience this stuff would have an influence on men thinking about these things as well. It's hard to say; it's hard to speculate about culture in this broad way.

What is in the future for the company?

I am very interested in and totally committed to growing, but the limits right now are our bandwidth and obviously it's a question of finances. But from a literary vision point of view, I want to promote South Indian and Indian talent. I also want to do a lot of translations from Indian languages to English, in particular the hidden gems from India literature.

We are quite encouraged by the new voices we are able to publish but I don't believe we are anywhere near realizing our vision. It'll take time to identify a few strong young voices. However, I will note this: A handful of stories published in *Saaranga* Magazine made the 'Best of Telugu' compilations in our very first year 2013, and also in 2014.