



GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY IN RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA

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ABSTRACT

In 'Kanthapura', Raja Rao gives microscopic picture of the Indian freedom movement during 1930s. The impact of Gandhian thought on the village of India itself is the theme of this novel. Mahatma Gandhi had converted the entire country into a body of non-violent freedom-fighters. Raja Rao prefers to deal with him through a local figure who appears to be his representative. Moorthy, the hero of the novel does the same miracle in Kanthapura. He is regarded as Gandhiji's true follower in Kanthapura. Thus, Raja Rao's novel Kanthapura presents the Gandhian ideology of non-violence and the abolition of untouchability. The great importance given to caste, the mythical presentation of Gandhi and mother India and the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the parameters of Indian cultural convention imply the tremendous impact of Gandhian ideology in Kanthapura.

INTRODUCTION

Gandhian thought engineered a mass-based political and social revolution during 1920 to 1940. The advent of Gandhian thought through the nationwide Gandhian movements made an extraordinarily deep impact on literary writers of the time, especially those writing in English. The decade of 1930s is also marked by the advent of the three pioneering writers-Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao whose contribution to Indian writing in English has been immense. Gandhian ideology is manifested in varied forms in their novels.

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Gandhian thought engineered a mass- based political and social revolution during 1920 to 1940. The advent and dissemination of Gandhian thought through the nationwide Gandhian movements made an extraordinarily deep impact on literary writers of the time, especially those writing in English. The decade of 1930s also hails the advent of the three pioneering writers- Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao whose contribution to Indian writing in English has been immense. Gandhian ideology is manifested in varied forms in their novels. It provided them, for the first time, a national context and the vision of a society on the move towards political freedom and socio-economic reconstruction. Intellectually and spiritually, it impelled them to seek a new identity, a delicate blend of the traditional and the modern.

In the 1930s the impact of Gandhiji and his ideology was immense. Gandhiji influenced millions of people in India in varying degrees. It is interesting to see how Gandhiji used religion and justified political and social action on “proper metaphysical grounds”. Relating it to the philosophy of Karmayoga of the ‘Gita’, Gandhiji made action part of man’s dharma. It is paradoxical that in Gandhiji, in spite of his interest in material life’s problems, there is an element of the purely immaterial, that is, the metaphysical idea of the life beyonds. But according to Gandhiji, man can reach the metaphysical only through his activity in this world. It is this spirituality of Gandhian thought, which emphasized the conditioning of human mind through control of the negative aspects of one’s self, leading to liberation and strength that appealed Raja Rao. And it is from this perspective that Rao perceives Gandhiji and it is in these terms only that his novels register the impact of Gandhian thought.

Raja Rao is called “a child of Gandhian age.’ He was greatly influenced by the ideology of the Gandhiji. In ‘*Kanthapura*’, Raja Rao gives microscopic picture of the Indian freedom movement during 1930s. The period covered in the novel is between Gandhiji’s Dandi March in 1930 to Gandhi-Irwin pact in 1931. The impact of Gandhian thought on the village of India itself is the theme of this novel. Iyenger rightly sums up the theme as “Gandhi and our village”. Raja Rao carefully explores the Gandhian ideals of loving one’s enemies, non-violence and abolition of untouchability in this novel.

In his first novel ‘*Kanthapura*’, Raja Rao attempted an appraisal of the efforts made by the Indians under the leadership of Gandhiji to attain political and social freedom. Hanging between hope and despair, people of even obscure places were making efforts to eradicate poverty, ignorance and slavery. This inspired Raja Rao, a sensitive young man to write this novel. Even in such an unknown village as *Kanthapura*, the wave of patriotism swept hard taking in its fold men, women and children.

Mahatma Gandhi had converted the entire country into a body of non-violent freedom – fighters. Raja Rao prefers to deal with him through a local figure who appears to be his

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representative. Moorthy, the hero of the novel does the same miracle in Kanthapura. He is regarded as Gandhiji's true follower in Kanthapura. People of Kanthapura say, "He is our Gandhi". He is the saint of the village. He is a social reformer, a satyagrahi, and the leader of the non-violent movement in Kanthapura. The ignorant, illiterate people of this village plunge into the freedom struggle with tremendous enthusiasm and make supreme sacrifices for the great cause. Mahatma Gandhi's movement was not merely political. It has three strands-religious, social and economic- and all these three are reflected in the activities carried out in Kanthapura. Gandhiji wanted his followers to have a firm faith in God and to practice truth and non-violence. The people of Kanthapura are deeply religious and remain non-violent in the face of the worst police atrocities. Gandhiji's social programmes included Harijan uplift, emancipation of women and removal of illiteracy.

The people of Kanthapura are deeply religious and all their activities get mixed with religion. In fact, the first suggestion that they should follow Gandhiji and fight against foreign government came from a harikatha of Jayaramchar in the Kanthapurishwari temple. The beginning of collective effort which later took the shape of the freedom movement was the founding of this temple. A linga was by chance discovered by Moorthy, the Gandhian, in a backyard. He suggested that they should build a temple. The boys build the temple by their own efforts and it was consecrated by Bhatt, the first Brahmin. Moorthy and his friends organize religious festivals, harikathas and Bhajans.

It is interesting to note that Gandhian principles reach the villagers through Harikathas recited by Jayaramachar. According to him, Gandhiji's three-fold programme was compared to the three eyes of Siva. As Krishna killed the big serpent, Gandhiji is going to kill the serpent of foreign rule. As Rama, he was going to kill Ravana (foreign rule) and liberate Sita (Bharata). This Harikathas was the inauguration of the freedom movement in Kanthapura. The Government understood this so they exiled Jayaramachar and posted Bade Khan in Kanthapura.

Like Gandhi, Moorthy has preached brotherhood and equality and castelessness and abolition of untouchability. The village of Kanthapura is Hindu and stratified on customary caste-lines. The main distinction is between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins. There is clearly a gulf between the two communities, and almost no social interaction beyond the unavoidable economic transactions. Moorthy tries to do away with untouchability. He comes back to Kanthapura with the message of the Mahatma.

".....there, is neither caste nor clan nor family.....One should not marry early, one should allow widows to take husbands and Brahmin might marry a Pariah and a Pariah a Brahmin."

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But since Gandhiji attacked the very basis of Hindu social structure i.e. the caste-system, Brahmins were wary of him because their vested interests were always at stake. Bhatt, for example, went against Gandhiji's Bhajans and other social programmes because he realized it was in the colonial system only that he could make more money by annexing land of the poor in place of loans he gave them. So he does his best to confuse the ignorant villagers saying that Gandhiji's business

“is Nothing but weaving coarse hand-made cloth, not fit for a mop, and bellowing out Bhajans and Bhajans, and mixing with the Pariahs”. (Kanthapura, p.42)

Moorthy's social vision is manifested in his endeavors to bring about unity, equality and individual dignity. He contemplates building a thousand-pillared temple, housing a pariah and a priest.

“Whether Brahmin or Bangle-seller, Pariah or priest, we are all one, one as the mustard seed in a sack of mustard seeds, equal in shape and hue and all.... We are yoked to the same plough.” Moorthy calls them to be silent: *“and the Brahmin heart and the weaver heart and pariah heart seemed to beat the one beat of Siva dancing.”* After the arrest of the Mahatma and when the conch is blown, people come...

the pariahs and the weavers and the potters all seemed to feel they were of one caste, one breath.” And Moorthy declares:

“.....there shall be neither Brahmin nor Pariah.”

Ratna brings the woman volunteers to such a point where considerations of caste and colour disappear:

“We are some secret brotherhood in some Himalayan cave.”

Rangamma sees him as the saint of Kanthapura, Moorthy, the good, Moorthy, the religious and Moorthy, the noble. Advocate Sankar finds no better Gandhist than Moorthy. Goldsmith Nanjundia discovers incorruptible qualities in him:

“Our Moorthy is like gold-the more you heat it the purer it comes out from the crucible.”



Moorthy is like an orbit influencing all the satellites. It is because of his nobility of heart, authenticity of action, dedication to the nation's cause and social concerns; all people are swept by him. If Range Gowda joined him leaving his Patelship, the advocate Shankar practices his law in Gandhian way. So is his noble impact upon Rangamma and Ratna, both noble savages. Still there are pariahs like Rachanna, Madanna, and a horde of coolies who have come down to the terrain of coffee estate straight from the catchment area of Godavari in Andhra Pradesh.

Meantime, the teach-in programme at the Pariah night school is continued by Moorthy to disseminate Gandhiji's ideas. He started teaching the Pariahs. He goes even to the Sheffington Coffee Estate to teach the coolies the art of weaving. Even he teaches them alphabets and grammar and arithmetic and Hindi. Moorthy feels Hindi must be the national language and like Chaucer's clerk he learns it gladly and teaches it to others gladly.

As an apologist to Gandhian ideology, Rao believes that "the future of the world is in Gandhism." Moorthy obtains spiritual power in his very first meeting with Gandhi, who primarily gives instruction to him in his political ideology. Moorthy says, "There is in it something of the silent communion of the ancient books." (52) He is spiritually influenced and states:

"There is but one force in life and that is truth, and there is but one love on life and that is the love of mankind, and there is but one God in life and that is the god of all". (52-53).

In essence Moorthy explicates his faith in Gandhism and acquires self-realization after catching a glimpse of the Mahatma.

Inspired and influenced by the ideology of Gandhiji, Moorthy starts preaching Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. Moorthy sees Seetharamu's willing acceptance of the torture by the British Government and it strengthens his belief in the Gandhian ontology of non-violence.

Like Moorthy, Jayaramchar also articulates the ideology of Gandhi:

"Fight, says he, but harms no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. Don't be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment and



attachment hides the face of truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for Truth is God and, verily, it is the only God I know.”(22)

Jayaramchar continues by saying that Truth is God and, therefore, the countrymen should speak the Truth. It has the tone of Bhagwat Gita, which emphasizes truthfulness as a part of human behavior.

In the wake of Khadi spread, Moorthy frequently visited Pariah quarters. He wanted that all the people of Kanthapura should ply the Charkha and wear only hand-woven cloth. Charkhas were provided by the Karwar Congress Committee and Moorthy and the other boys distributed these among the Pariah families. Explaining the purpose of Charkha (spinning wheel),

Moorthy says, “....if you spin, the money that goes to the Red-men will stay within your country and the Mother can feed the foodless and the milk less and the cloth less.”

Again, “.....to wear cloth spun and woven with your own God-given hands is sacred. It gives work to the workless, and work to the lazy.”

Gandhiji was firmly of the opinion that India’s salvation depends on the sacrifice and enlightenment of her women. He wanted utmost freedom for women. He made no distinction between man and women and desired an equal status for the latter. In Kanthapura, Raja Rao has also upheld the idea of equality for women Uma Parmeswaran, the critic, traces the theme of Shakti or female principles in this novel.

Gandhiji said that widow-remarriage is no sin –if it be, it is as much a sin as the marriage of a widower is. Raja Rao has beautifully exemplified this thought through two female characters-Rangamma and Ratna in this novel. In the beginning of the novel widows are considered as underprivileged persons, and are denied privileges that the married ones enjoy. They are female Pariahs. It is reflected in Venkamma’s attitude towards Rangamma. She says,

“Why should a widow and a childless widow, too, have a big house like that? ...and you have only to look at her gold belt and Dharamwar sari. Whore!”

Gandhiji’s vision of life finds an outlet in *Kanthapura*. People start a Congress Committee in the line of Karwar Congress Committee. Moorthy, Patel Range Gowda, Rangamma, Rachanna and Seenu-all become members of it. Moorthy is its president, Range Gowda the super-president and Rangamma the woman representative. Moorthy insists that they need a



woman in the committee for the Congress is for the weak and the lowly. Rachanna is chosen as the Pariah representative. The fifth member is Seenu who, as Range Gowda's mythical imagination sees, will be fire-tailed Hanuman to Moorthy, the Rama. The formation of committee and its manifold activities provoke Bhatt who is a pontifical Brahmin but lately a money-lender. The committee launched the programme of boycotting toddy shops and toddy booths. The government dealt with the Satyagrahis brutally. There were arrests and lathi charges.

Being a true Gandhian, Moorthy campaigned against the evil of drinking. More of women than men are attracted by his social activities. These women under the leadership of Rangamma who was Moorthy's right hand in Kanthapura go to toddy groves just to destroy toddy business that worsened people's lives. They sing songs while doing all this brave work in the teeth of British opposition.

*At least a toddy pot, sister,
At least a toddy -leaf, sister,
We'll go to Boranna's Toddy grove,
We'll go to Boranna's Toddy growth,
And procession back at least a toddy-leaf, sister. (182)*

They ask them not to drink it at least in the name of Mahatma.

"Oh, brother, in the name of Mahatma do not drink, for drinking is bad and the government profits by your vice and the usurer profits by your debt, and your wife goes unclothed and your children unfed....."

The slogan, Inquilab Zindabad, Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai, Vande Mataram are drilled often. Finally the bloody government auctions most of the lands of Kanthapura to the rich people from outside forcing most of the villagers to other villages like Kashipura, Malur and Ramapura. Thus by fate they are forced to sacrifice their lands and assets for the liberation of their mother nation.

Like Gandhi, Moorthy has preached brotherhood and equality and castelessness and abolition of untouchability. Mahatma is pictured "as large and blue like Sahyadri Mountains on whose slopes the pilgrims climb to the top," while Moorthy is seen "as the small mountain." Gandhi is also considered by the village people as Siva. They sing the Bhajan: "Siva is the three eyed and Swaraj too is three-eyed self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar." (20) Apart from Moorthy, the leading spirits of the Gandhian revolution at Kanthapura are Rangamura, Range Gowda and the girl Ratna.



The widening gap between the rich and the poor vexed the sensitive mind of Gandhiji. He believed in an ideal economy based on simplicity, non-violence, dignity and sanctity of labour and human values. Racial as well as economic exploitation is shown in the very beginning of the novel. It can be seen in its demonic form at the Skeffington Coffee Estate owned by Hunter Sahib. The dehumanizing working conditions of labourers, their low wages and the cruel and callous attitude of the Britishers' towards them is well-documented here. Raja Rao has aptly described the poverty – tormented coolies marching to the Skeffington Coffee Estate:

“.....and the pots became empty of water and the sacks began to grow fat with clothes, and the pots on their heads and the clothes in their arms, they marched on and on by the Godavery.....armies of coolieshalf naked, starving, spitting, weeping, vomiting, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting moaning coolies.....”.

Thus, Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* presents the Gandhian ideology of non-violence and the abolition of untouchability. The great importance given to caste, the mythical presentation of Gandhi and mother India and the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the parameters of Indian cultural convention imply the tremendous impact of Gandhian ideology in *Kanthapura*.

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