



GANDHI IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*: A NATIONAL, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with emergence of Raja Rao's novel Kanthapura as a national, political and social novel. It's an amalgam of Gandhi's ideology and philosophical consciousness to eradicate mighty British Empire. The paper deals with the influence and impact of Gandhi's principles on people from all sections of the society. Moorthy, the protagonist, is replica of Gandhi's ideals and persona. He leads the freedom struggle in the small village of Kanthapura. Kanthapura becomes the battleground 'Kurukshetra' and the fight between suras (Indian) and asuras (British) is found. It's projected as war between the forces of good and evil, truth and untruth, love and hatred. The paper explores how Gandhian leadership and value have affected the distant Indian villages. It articulates Raja Rao's spiritual doctrine which fits the socio-spiritual cosmic insight of India. It further focuses on the novel being considered as Gandipuram.

Keywords: Gandhi, National, Political, Social, Leadership, Doctrine

I. Introduction

Raja Rao is considered as one of the great Indian novelist. He secured the future of Indian writing in English by turning writing in English into a solidified material that had assumed international proportions by the 1940s. His first novel, Kanthapura is his biggest achievement and the way the novel is put in an Indian setting is remarkable. The novel's foreword refers to

the way he has aimed to integrate *sthalapurana* (the legendary history of the village) with contemporary history, so that “the past mingles with present both projected in time future” (Dalton: 2000). It gives an impression of oral narrative skinned with traditional Sanskrit *puranas* that mixes story telling of Indian epic and legendary. Raja Rao himself says “our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect” (Foreword: V), “Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling” (Foreword: VI). It’s an account of the renaissance of Indian spiritual life under the impact of the independence movement. Its message is essentially spiritual and cultural (Natarajan: 1996).

Raja Rao has traveled extensively abroad. He was brought up in the intellectual climate of France. Shiva Niranjana points out that “the long years of expatriation have made Raja Rao more Indian than an average Indian struggling desperately to make the two ends meet” (29). He also refers to Raja Rao’s being an heir to two worlds: “India, the land of his birth and inheritance, and France, the land of his acquisition, where he has spent an almost equal number of years as in India”. However, the insistent presence of India in his works heightens a sense of absence and alienation. His studying in France not only broadened his horizons but also led him to mark his own identity, uniqueness and creativity; towards religious belief in specific.

Raja Rao was not an activist but the very cause called by M. K. Gandhi could not help him to be drawn towards freedom struggle. The 1930s was the period of tumult in India and no Indian could remain untouched by that. Everyone contributed in one’s own way; economically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Raja Rao too contributed by his writings.

II. Moorthy: As Replica of Gandhi’s Ideals

Raja Rao’s novel *Kanthapura* portrays the main protagonist Moorthy as replica of Gandhi’s ideals and persona. The way the sequence of events occurs in the novel, models Gandhi’s fight for the Independence and freedom of India in the form of Moorthy. Moorthy not only idealizes Gandhi but is also an ardent supporter of Gandhi’s opinion and beliefs. Moorthy practices non-violence, fearlessness, and fight against untouchability, social prejudices and superstitions. It shows how an average Indian had an impact of Gandhian thought that even Moorthy could courage to prompt mighty British in a small village of South India, Kanthapura.

Moorthy was the voice of common people. His participation bears testimony to Gandhian teachings and illustrates the interminable link between the historical and political upheavals in all parts of Indian villages. Although the novel overshadows the personal side of Moorthy, it's through Moorthy, the country is emphasized. What matters is not the individual but the person, in this novel, essentially its Moorthy who leads the resistance movement opposing colonial exploitation. Moorthy preached villagers each day the progress of Salt march by Gandhi:

“And the next day the White Papers told us the Mahatma had taken handful of salt after his ablutions, and he had bought it home, and then everybody went to the sea to prepare salt, and cartloads and cartloads of it began to be brought back and distributed from house to house with music and clapping of hands.And so day after day men go out to the sea to make salt, and day after day men are beaten back and put into prison, and yet village after village sends its women and men, and village after village grows empty, for the call of the Mahatma had sung in their hearts, and they were for the Mahatma”. (Kanthapura: 174)

Inspired and influenced by Gandhian thoughts Moorthy very well knew to bring Brahmins, potters, weavers and pariahs under one placard of religion. He suggested regular festivals to be held at Kanthapurishwary Temple where through ‘Harikatha’ Gandhian ideology was poured in the minds of villagers. To them, Gandhi represents religious sentiment to root out British Empire. But all this needs to be achieved following the path of non-violence and truth:

‘There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is love of mankind....’ (Kanthapura: 48)

Gandhian principles did not stop Moorthy in his fight for freedom struggle. When, ‘Harikatha’ man was arrested, he bought cotton, spinning wheels and publicity material from the city. The freedom movement gained pace in Kanthapura. The whole village joined the movement and it even reached to Skeffington Coffee Estate, which state a sad picture of workers:

“half-naked, starving, spitting, weeping, vomiting, coughing, shivering, squeaking, shouting, moaning coolies” (Kanthapura: 65)

Moorthy goes there to rescue them from the atrocities and ill-treatment of the workers. The presence of Moorthy provided moral boost to the colliers and they were bold enough to say, “what is a policeman before a Gandhi’s men.” (Kanthapura: 65) He also undertakes a fast for self purification. Moorthy, after meeting Gangamma, the pariah woman, has his bath and changes his clothes and drinks a little Ganges water and in this way purifies himself as a true Brahmin. However, it reflects the deep rooted chains of caste and creed that even Moorthy can’t resist it.

III. Kanthapura: A National Novel

Moorthy tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of people of Kanthapura and made them to contribute in national movement. It’s equally important for us to understand that to dive deep into any social reformation in India one has to infuse thoughts through religious sermons. That’s what exactly happened in the novel wherein under the guise of religious preaching Gandhian ideology was suffused so as to bring awareness and participation of people in nationwide movement for free India.

Moorthy implements the Gandhian thought and works in the village. He carries the message of Gandhi door to door and makes the villagers aware about the benefits of spinning and wearing khadi. He says:

“more and more men followed him, as they did Krishna the flute-player; and so he goes from village to village to slay the serpent of the foreign rule. Fight says he but harm no soul. Love all, says he,, 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. And he says too, spin every day. Spin weave every day, for our mother is in tattered weeds and a poor mother needs clothes to cover her sores. If you spin, he says, the money that goes to the Red-man will stay within your country and the mother can feed the milkless and the clothless. He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint. You know how he fasts and prays. And even his enemies fall at his feet.” (Kanthapura: 16-17)

To induce the idea of unity, Moorthy propelled Gandhi's views time by time. He quoted Gandhi "There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is love of mankind, ..". Moorthy wanted to take all sections of society including Pariah's into this fight. Despite the fact he would be excommunicated for his work for Pariah's, Moorthy says:

"Let the Swami do what he likes. I will go and do more and more pariah work. I will go and eat with them if necessary. Why not? Are they not men like us. And the swami, who is he? A self-chosen fool. He may be learned in the Vedas and all that. But he has no heart. He has no thinking power." (Kanthapura: 59)

Moorthy went more and more into the pariah quarters, and some time later he was seen walking side by side to them. When Beadle Timmayya's son Puttayya lost his wife, he even carried the body for while and did it openly to break the mental blocks among people. Moorthy was unstoppable, he then left for Skeffington Coffee Estate, for there, too, were pariah's who needed his help. It is interesting to see how Moorthy transformed people to frank recognition of Pariah's. This transformation is exactly what change Gandhi wanted to bring. Moorthy further propagates non-violence saying, "I shall love even my enemies" (Kanthapura: 89). He emphatically says, "I shall speak that which Truth prompteth, and Truth needeth no defence" (Kanthapura: 123). Moorthy imitates his leader Gandhi by fasting to deter any violence. Moorthy has risen above the worldly things not just as a Gandhian hero but a national hero.

IV. Kanthapura: A political novel

Kanthapura narrates the political movement led by Gandhi which portrays vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of resurgence of India; its religious character, its economic and social concerns, its political ideals precisely in the way Gandhi tried to spiritualize politics, the capacity for sacrifice of a people in response to the call of one like Gandhi-not the spectacular sacrifice of the few chosen ones who later became India's rulers, but the officially unchronicled, little, nameless, unremembered acts of courage, and sacrifice of peasants and farm hands, students and lawyers, women and old men, thanks to whom Gandhi's unique experiment gathered momentum and grew into a national and political movement. The underlying political aim of this movement was to make people fearless and stand against injustice and discrimination by British colonialism.

Kanthapura is a political novel. For Kanthapura, is India is microcosm: what happened there is what happened in many places during India's fight for freedom. The young Moorthy realizes the vision of Gandhi and gets transformed. He forms a congress working committee in the village and involves everyone to be a part of it. He launches Sathyagraha movement first by bringing awareness and then combined confronting the British against high taxes, land revenues, atrocities towards poor peasants, exploitation of workers in a non violent manner. Moorthy encourages and pleases the women and organizes them. A Women Volunteer Corps is also formed in the village. Everyone whether young or old, rich or poor, men or women, take an active part in the freedom struggle.

The "don't-touch-the-government" campaign was a clever political move of the times. It shackled the roots of British in India. Gandhi advocated fighting British by non-violence. British were forced to leave India. At one point Rangamma says, "Oh no, the Mahatma need not go so far as the sea. Like Harishchandra before he finished his vow, the gods will come down and dissolve his vow, and the Britishers will leave India, and we shall be free, and we shall pay less tax and there will be no policemen". (Kanthapura: 171) Apart from attacking toody booth, the decision not to pay taxes invited massive slaughter and confiscation of property, lands and villages. Under such circumstances, Moorthy thought of including participation of women in the panchayat. The women leaders, Rangamma and Ratna act as source of inspiration to the village women. It's an important political move in the story, the idea, which gradually moves forward as the story of collective (including both men and women) confrontation with the British authorities.

The story of the novel progresses at a point when the freedom fighters of Kanthapura were mercilessly and brutally beaten by the red-men (British), they resort to mass arrest and tortures. The police rained lathi blows on the freedom fighters. The novel presents the harrowing tale of mass casualties:

"And then more and more men crawl up, and more wounded are brought up, naked, half covered, earth covered are they brought up, with dangling legs, dangling hands and bleeding hands, and with bleeding mouths and bleeding forehead and backs are they brought up, city boys and peasant boys are they, young and bright as banana trunks, city men and peasant men, lean-ribbed, long toed, with cut

moustaches and long whiskers-peasant women and city women are they , widows, mothers, daughters, stepdaughters-and some speak in free voices and some in breathless sputters, and some can do no more than wallow and wail.” (Kanthapura: 251)

The slogans like ‘Gandhi Mahatma ki Jai! Inquilab Zindabad! Vande Matram! Mahatma, Mahatma, Gandhi Mahatma! ‘Salute, and march past the flag, and you will be free, ’ swayed the entire country in fight against British colonialism. The satyagrahi’s sung:

O fire, O soul,

Give us the spark of God-eternal,

That friend to friend and friend to foe,

One shall we stand for Him

And the flame of Jatin,

And the fire of Bhagath,

And the love of the Mahatma in all,

O, lift the flag high,

Lift the flag high,

This is the flag of the Revolution.

This was the kind of political tempo built up all-round the nation that turned all small and big villages into courtyard of revolution

V. Kanthapura: A Social Novel

Kanthapura presents the social structure of India. It’s a very small village divided into Brahmin, potters, weavers and pariahs based on caste and communities. They believe in age-long caste system and untouchability of Indian society. The human features of jealousy and a quarrel of villagers is evident in the novel. The belief in superstitions, orthodoxy, and myth is prevalent in Indian villages. Gandhi rejected this tenet of age-old caste system. Moorthy, a follower of

Gandhi's principles and ideology carries forward this idea in the novel. He suggests the holding of regular festivals and the contributions to be made by village people. He tries to break the orthodoxy of people by connecting to pariahs and mixing Gandhi ideals poured with Harikatha.

The Indian struggle of freedom is equated with the great war of Mahabharata, the fight between suras (Indian) and asuras (Britishers) is found. It's projected as war between the forces of good and evil, truth and untruth, love and hatred. As in Ramayana, Moorthy (messenger of Gandhi) forms Congress Committee with the help of Rachanna, Range Gowde (Hanuman) to save mother India (Sita) from the demon Ravana (the British). As Wadhvaniya Mayur (2013) says: "Myth is like a religious ritual which makes the life more meaningful and enriches it by penetrating to its essence."

Thus, this novel is a true presentation of social beliefs, tradition, legend and the social fabric of the society. The novel has enabled the reader to understand the soul of traditional India and Raja Rao is admittedly an upholder of traditions.

The novel also addresses how the society is afflicted with the dowry system, human bondage, and maltreatment of the widows, drinking, corruption, child marriage, untouchability and superstitions.

VI. Conclusion

Kanthapura is an enticing story of how the freedom movement becomes a tragic reality in a tiny village in South India. Moorthy is in true sense the replica of both Gandhian ideology and his own self. The novel is Indian both in theme and treatment. It expresses the Indian sensibility to perfection. The religious elements and the social, political and national issues are artistically transformed into one entity. Gandhi's impact is conveyed through Moorthy which transforms the life of an entire community from the bondage of high-bound orthodoxy to struggle and sacrifice for an ideal.

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