

## **Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*; Gandhiji's Influence on the Villagers and Their Participation in the Freedom Struggle**

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### **Abstract**

Prominent writers R.K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao laid strong foundation to Indian English Novel with the remarkable styles and themes of their writings. They tried to explore social problems and lives of the people of India. They, no doubt to say, succeeded in their attempts. R.K. Narayan depicts Indians in his novels by creating imaginary town 'Malgudi', in 'Untouchable' Mulkraj Anand describes the social evil untouchability, in his novel 'Kanthapura' Rajarao describes the significant influence of Gandhi on the people of a sleepy village down south. Here in this novel Raja Rao succeeded in giving the real picture of an Indian village of pre independence. The whole reading of the novel makes the reader feel that reality has been presented with the beautiful artistic skills of the writer and it also gives the impression that it is one of the most significant novels in Indian English literature.

**KEYWORDS:** freedom struggle, caste system, nationality, Gandhiji's influence

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The novel *Kanthapura* gives the true picture of a village that represents India's ancient culture which is still living. The novel depicts the freedom movement at the time of the Civil Disobedience in Kantapura, a village in southern India in the British rule. According to Gandhian views villages face much difficulty in accepting the changes in its social life, specifically, caste system as it has deep roots in the society. It reveals how Gandhiji's struggle for independence came to Kanthapura. It also beautifully presents how people of the village react to Gandhi's call to unite the people of India against the British rule. E.M. Foster, noted English writer, opined that *Kanthapura* was the best novel ever written in English by an Indian. Writing about earlier novelists Mukherjee says "The few writers who wrote novels in English in the early part of this century used the language carefully, with stiff correctness, always conscious that it was a foreign tongue" (Mukherjee 1971, 170) K.R.S.Iyengar rightly remarks:

The hum-drum becomes the unique, the trivial becomes the heroic and the hectic excitement of a day becomes a permanent communal possession...the heroes and heroines of epics jostle with historic personalities and time past and time present are both projected into time future.(390)

The novel highlights the delicate issue of a secret agreement between Brahmanism and Colonialism. Moorthy, protagonist of the novel, a Brahmin, becomes an out caste among the Brahmin community with his efforts against untouchability. It reveals conflict

between Brahmanism and Nationalism. The novel conveys that for most of the Brahmins Gandhi's anti untouchable movement is more harmful than the British rule. The novel ably reflects the attitude of Brahmins, the high caste people, towards the lower caste people in the society. It also focuses on the cruelty and rigorous acts of the British rulers in suppressing the non-violent agitation of the freedom fighters. The novel offers insights that are about immense complication and violence when colonial modernity reached India. Uma Maheswar Rao aptly gave his opinion about Raja Rao's diction and skill of writing:

Raja Rao is profoundly metaphysical in the way he thinks and feels and he has a scholarly background, an intimate familiarity with primary texts of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian philosophies; his mastery of English vocabulary is indisputable (as is his mastery of French), and his prose is often scintillating poetry. All of his novels explore philosophical concepts.

Kantapura is a very small village consisting a hundred houses. People of the village worship Goddess Kenchamma. They are superstitious and religious. Their major occupation is agriculture. The village is divided into a number of quarters like Brahmin quarter, potters quarter, weavers' quarter and pariahs' quarter based on caste and communities. Timmaya and Sidda are well known persons in the pariah quarter. The story is told by Achakka, an old woman in the village. The narration is reminiscence. The story is all about the lives of the people of Kanthapura, and their participation in the freedom struggle.

Patel Range Gowda, one of the richest, helps his fellow sudras when they are in trouble. The post master Suryanarayana and Patwari Nanjundia have big houses. Waterfall Venkamma is full of jealousy as her widowed sister-in-law Rangamma, who has no child, lives in a big house. Venkamma is also jealous of the temple house people and fig tree house people for they are often invited to the Kannaya house, while she is not. In this way a real picture of the jealousies and quarrels of villagers which are marked features of village life, is given in the novel. Many villages in India still have superstitions. Likewise Kanthapura too has its superstitions. It believes in a number of Gods and Goddesses. They believe that Goddess Kenchamma protects the villagers from fatal diseases. The small Kanthapuriswari temple which was constructed only three years ago, has become the centre of the village life.

Moorthy, the protagonist, a landed young Brahmin widely known in the village for his good nature and kindness and is respected for his learning. He finds a Siva Linga in the backyard of the novel's narrator, Achakka. Moorthy's proposes that the Linga should be washed and consecrated in a public ceremony. The villagers accept it. A consecration and a feast accordingly occur, followed by a religious folk entertainment at the Kanthapura temple. Moorthy then suggests the regular festivals be held in honor of one Hindu God. In order to finance the next festival, he goes from house to house requesting contributions.

Achakka who at the time of this episode still adhered to the traditional

idea of Brahman caste purity, tell sister the visitor to Kantapura to whom she's recounting the sad story of her village that she would cover her ears upon hearing of Moorthy's soliciting contributions even though she was in the pariah quarter.

Moorthy leads Kanthapura people to play an active part in Gandhi's non-violent struggle for freedom. Moorthy being educated knows well that religion is main factor and its is the basis for the mindset of the people. So he wants to instill Gandhian principles of non-violence and satyagraha. He thinks that traditional harikatha is useful to spread Gandhian ideology among orthodox people. Consequently a harikatha is performed. It dramatises Mahatma's birth as reincarnation of Krishna, who killed the serpent Kali. He says:

You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country.(12)

The narrator of the story also describes Mahatma Gandhi as Rama whom most of Indians worship. She says, "They say the Mahatma will go to the Red man's country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma .And we shall be happy. And Rama will come back from exile" (189). Moorthy's pariah connections anger several Kanthapura Brahmins, particularly the wealthy landlord and money lender Bhatta. The next time he sees Moorthy among the pariahs, at a funeral ceremony carrying the corpse of wife of one of the pariahs. Bhatta runs down to the city that very morning and comes back two days later with the word of that Moorthy and his family members have been excommunicated. Moorthy's mother, who is religious, overwhelmed by shame and despair, dies thinking that her son has brought disrespect and dishonor.

The Harikatha man is arrested. Moorthy under the influence of Gandhian principles again goes to city and comes with cotton, spinning wheels and publicity material. With this, freedom movement entered Kanthapura. Kannayya's house has become the office of the village congress committee. Rangamma and Ratna, niece of Rangamma, a widow but living with modern views, and some others also take keen interest in the work of the congress. Moorthy continues visiting pariahs. . He distributes Charkhas and teaches the people to make Khadi. He carries this Khadi to town to sell. Thus he tries to make deprived class become economically independent. It is decided that to teach pariahs. Moorthy will go to the Skeffington coffee estate, where workers are exploited in many ways including sexually also. Wages are not given to the workers properly. White Sahib's treatment with the collies is cruel and brutal.

Moorthy undertakes a fast for self purification before starting 'Don't Touch the Government Campaign'. He convinces Range Gowda, Ramayya and Siddayya to take up the work of the congress. Moorthy, after meeting Gangamma, the pariah woman, has his bath and changes his cloths and drinks a little Ganges water and in this way purifies himself as a true Brahmin. It is strange that the man trying to eradicate untouchability

also behaves as an orthodox and religious Brahmin. The caste system is too firmly has its roots in Indian society and even educated men like Moorthy are victims of it. Even they are not bold to break the chains of caste and creed.

The police search the house of Moorthy and he is arrested because of his anti-government activities. People create many obstacles as they are conscious about the importance of freedom. The Karwar Congress Committee supports Moorthy by providing lawyer but Moorthy believes that truth is on his side so that will help him. Ratana leads the people of village in the absence of Moorthy. Many incidents happens one after one. The market day is selected for offering Satyagraha in front of the Toddy booth to prevent the coolies from drinking. The police men beat the coolies who have refused to walk over the satyagrahis. The crowd yelled 'Mahatma ki Jai'. All are arrested and taken to jail. Many coolies of the Skeffington coffee Estate have come to live with the pariahs and be a support to them. They all say, 'The army of the Mahatma is an increasing garland.'

The Satyagraha at Baronna's Toddy Booth is a success and it encourages people in the neighboring villages to offer Satyagraha. A number of other Toddy Booths are forced to close down one after another. Moorthy becomes famous and people say Kanthapura is lucky to have such a great man living in it. When all coolies are rebellious the British bring city coolies. The white men announce that those who don't pay the taxes will be regarded as rebels and their fields will be auctioned. The women are terrified. Santamma even denounces Moorthy and Mahatma for bringing all the misery upon them. The people are pacified by saying many congress people will come from city to save them. The people grow fearless and eagerly participate in the non violent struggle. The greater the government repression the stronger is the resistance of the people.

The consequent events also reflect how people untiringly struggled for Independence. The Villagers of Kanthapura decide that there will be Satyanarayana Puja. The God is taken out in a procession and under the cover of this procession they want to go out of Kanthapura. Coolies coming from city set to work cutting the rice growing on the fields. People shout 'Mahathma Gandhi ki jai, Inquilab Zindabad' and the police shower lathi blows on them so that the procession throne and the God and the flowers falls down. Then someone suddenly poises the tri-coloured flag from the top of a papal tree and sings out loudly;

Lift the flag high  
O, lift the flag high  
Brothers, sisters, friends and mothers,  
This the flag of the Revolution

These words portray the true patriotic spirit and the urge of Indians for freedom. The police rush at the person who has the flag and the flag is fluttered and leaped from hand to hand .The bloody battle continues in the fields. Wounded people are carried on the stretchers. Many women are wailing and crying. Rachi, Rachanna's wife and some other pariah woman actively burn granaries, byres and houses .They struggle with the soldiers and reaches the banks of the Kavery and soon cross over to the state of Mysore on the

other side. They are given hero's welcome by the people. They are garlanded and called 'The pilgrims of Mahatma'. It is the village of Kashipura and they decide to settle there.

Thus, *Kanthapura* is an enticing story of how the freedom movement becomes a tragic reality in a tiny village in south India. Rao treats history of freedom movement at the level of hostility between village folk and British colonial authority. It is clear that the writer could give reality out of his quest. Raja Rao's skills appear in each and every page. M.K.Naik rightly remarks:

*Kanthapura* is, thus a brilliant attempt to probe the depths to  
Which the nationalistic urge penetrated, showing how, even  
in the remote villages, the new upsurge fused completely with  
traditional and religious faith, thus rediscovering the Indian soul.

Every incident in the social life of the people of *Kanthapura* and every incident in the participation of freedom movement of the villagers of *Kanthapura* reveals Raja Rao's ability as a novelist. One can say that undoubtedly, Raja Rao has achieved his goal of exploring reality through his remarkable novel *Kanthapura*.

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