



Raja Rao's Kanthapura: A Journey to Decolonization

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Abstract— *Kanthapura* (1938) depicts the conflict between Indian villagers and the Indian British authorities. Here Raja Rao paints Moorthy as a bold follower of Gandhian ideology. As a freedom fighter he does not accept caste barriers at all. Here Bhatta, the money lender exploits the poor innocent villagers. Gandhi's plan to introduce Charkha succeeds and many villagers start earning their livelihood. Moorthy organizes the villagers for national cause and they follow Gandhian dictates. As a result the tax policy of British government gets a set back. Finally, Moorthy is arrested but not excommunicated. When he comes out of prison, he asks his followers to lead a life of 'action'. Much has got to be done for national freedom. This novel is remarkable for social realism, economic realism and political realism. There is a direct encounter between villagers of Kanthapura and the British imperial powers.

Keywords— *Non-cooperation Movement, Renaissance Movement, Bolshevik Revolution, Non-possessiveness, Excommunication.*

INTRODUCTION

When *Kanthapura* got published (1938), popularity of Gandhi had spread widely. In spite of failure of Civil Disobedience Movement and Non-cooperation Movement his principles of truth and non-violence were accepted. Many British authorities often felt that the British government would not be able to control India for a long time. In this novel the artist portrays the influence of Gandhism upon the people of *Kanthapura*.

Like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao makes *Kanthapura* village popular. There was no heroic figure here except Moorthy. The poor farmers and labourers led a miserable life here. The artist tells us that the villagers offered prayers to goddess Kenchamma. She helps them in adversity as well as prosperity. If they need a male child they request her to fulfil their desire. Whenever something goes wrong in the family, they request her to protect them from the situation. As she is 'mother of earth' and 'blood of life' she is regarded supreme power. Unfortunately the villagers of *Kanthapura* are illiterate and poor. They have not read *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads*, *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* and *The Bhagwadgita* and fail to discuss the complex

questions regarding soul, death, next world, hell and heaven. If someone dies of cholera, smallpox or dysentery, they call it the working of destiny. Let Her protect them in times of 'famine, disease, death and despair'. (K.p.3) whenever their fields yield good crops, it is due to Her blessings. They dance before her just to get Her help in future too.

Exposition:

Only a few persons are fine financially in *Kanthapura*. Postmaster Suryanarayana has two floor house. Village Patwari Nanjudia leads a pleasant life. Wicked Bhatta lends money on heavy interest. As pseudo-religious figure, he is cunning at heart. Chinnamma, Venkamma, Achakka, Rangamma, Lakshamma etc. work hard in fields since morning till evening and are unaware of national problems. Unfortunately there is a line of demarcation between the Hindus and Parihas. The people don't want to mix up with the Parihas. The ancient caste system is rigidly followed in *Kanthapura*. But Moorthy, the follower of Gandhi ji, wants to remove the curse of untouchability. He visits the streets of Parihas and accepts food and water with their hands. In real life, he finds no

difference between man and man and becomes the target of criticism in *Kanthapura*. Many Brahmins plan for his excommunication and yet he asks Brahmins to change their attitude towards Paribas as it is the command of Gandhi. He is regarded 'quiet, generous, serene, deferent and brahmanic' (K, p. 5). There is no limit to the miseries of Paribas as they don't get proper food to eat and decent clothes to wear. Sankara Jayanthi is celebrated in the village when Moorthy takes the Shiv-Linga out of earth and places it in the temple. A few villagers enjoy discussing the principles of Vedanta with the learned Ramakrishnaya. Often these villagers listen the Harikatha and yet nobody organizes political meetings to awaken their political ambitions. At times they enjoy arranging Rama festival, Krishna festival, Dusshera festival, Deepawali festival and Holi festival.

Conflict:

Moorthy propagates the fundamentals of Gandhism to the villagers of *Kanthapura*. With time the situation changes slowly as the people become conscious of liberty. Yet they fail to explain the evils of British imperialism. True is that they don't know the details of British economic policy and how they get exploited by the rulers? Moorthy suggests that widows should have a right to get married again. Then he inspires harmony in society. Moorthy says that people have to get rid of foreign cloth as the battle of freedom has got to be fought with Khaddar too. Gandhi accepts the new needs of self-purification and Hindu-Muslim unity. If Hindus and Muslims continue to quarrel with each other, no harmony will be established in society. Even the son of Post Master tells his mother that Mahatma ji a saint, a holy man. (K.p.11)

Here the author refers the message of saint Valmiki who told Brahma:

'Rise up, O God of Gods! ... Far down on Earth you chose as your chief daughter Bharatha, the goddess of wisdom and well-being... you gave her the riches of gold and of diamonds, and you gave her kings such as the world has never seen ...' (K.p.11)

Valmiki is admired for writing *The Ramayana*. R.K. Narayana wrote the novels *Waiting For The Mahatma*, and *The Vendor of Sweets* to illustrate the fundamentals of Gandhism. In *Waiting For The Mahatma* he described the passion of Sriram for Bharathi and united them in the end of with the blessings of Gandhi. In *The Vendor of Sweets* R.K. Narayan describes the agonies of Jagan who is restless due to misconduct and lechery of his only son Mali. Mali and Grace share the same bed for many days and yet don't get married. So Jagan is totally disillusioned with his behavior. When Mali is arrested by the police, Jagan manages for the return ticket of Grace and renounces

family life. But Raja Rao does not introduce any love story in *Kanthapura*. In *Kanthapura* the conflict is between the British authorities (West) and the followers of Gandhi (East). These freedom fighters continue to build political but peaceful pressure upon them to leave India.

Nucleus:

Here Raja Rao refers Lord Krishna's theory — 'Whenever evil reaches its climax, He takes birth on earth to establish the rule of Dharma.' (The Bhagwadgita) Raja Rao regards Gandhi a divine soul as the latter took birth to abolish the British rule. He says:

'... you remember how Krishna, when he was but a baby of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kalia. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country ... Love all, says, he, Hindu, Mohamedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. (K.p.12)

Gandhi asks his follower, like Buddha, that material passions are responsible for human sufferings and hence to be controlled. The rustics regard India as mother of all Indians and are ready to sacrifice for her security and freedom. Gandhi asks people to use Swadeshi goods. Gandhi's economic policy inspires many rustics and they burn all foreign clothes. Regarding Gandhi Raja Rao remarks:

'He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint... And even his enemies fall at his feet. (K.p.12)

Due to Moorthy, the villagers of *Kanthapura* felt convinced with the concept of national freedom. Dore, Puttu, Sastri, Pandit Venkateshia, Sami, Seenu, Chandru, Ramu etc. follow the ideas of Moorthy. It is true that Moorthy does not perform very heroic deeds and yet he convinces the villagers of *Kanthapura* for a life of action. He expects nothing from Bade Khan, Bhatt and New Sahib. Bhatt has been satirized as the Mahajan of India. Surprisingly many police officers were Indians and yet loyal to the British government.

Bade Khan became angry when he failed to collect the revenues. The author laments that the British authorities squeeze money from the poor farmers. Now Moorthy provokes the farmers to stop paying the revenues because British government had no welfare schemes for their welfare. The activities of a few villagers were eventually political. The farmers accepted Charkha as a means of income and the spinning wheels are distributed in many villages. The darkness begins to wither away.

Moorthy's feelings of nationalism and self-reliance created nationalism in the heart of rustics. This became popular in Indian villages and it gave a severe blow to British economy. So far, Indian cotton was the best raw material

for the British Cloth Mills. The author regards Skeffington Coffee Estate as a centre of exploitation because its products were sent to other countries.

Ironically advanced Indians (still) feel attracted towards soaps and British perfumes. Due to illiteracy villagers fail to understand the tricky British policies of trade and commerce. But Moorthy exposes the whole trick of British authorities and now Indians oppose them boldly. Raja Rao says:

'They bring soaps and perfumes and thus they buy your rice and sell their wares. You get poorer and poor ... (K.p.19)

The result is that many villagers follow the practice of spinning Charkha daily.

Here Raja Rao refers to Gandhi's autobiography *My Experiments With Truth* and feels impressed with his various actions. So far Gandhi had struggled hard in South Africa. Of course, Raja Rao hates the money-lenders and feudal lords of India:

'That meant money. Money meant Bhatta — always smiling, always ready, and always friendly. Bhatta was a fine fellow for all that. With his smile and holy ashes, he said he would one day own the whole village.' (K.p.22)

Quite often he quotes sentences from *The Gita* to illustrate the importance of action and liberation. Bhatta noticed changes in the social set up of Kanthapura and does not relish that. Raja Rao satirizes this fact through Bhatta:

'What is this Gandhi business? Nothing but weaving coarse-hand-made cloth, not fit for a mop and bellowing out Bhajans and Bhajans, and mixing with Pariahs. Pariahs now come to the temple door and tomorrow they would like to be in the heart of it.' (K.p.28)

Soon change appears in the rural social and political scenario. Bhatta says:

'But really, aunt, we live in a strange age. What with their modern education and their modern women. Do you know, in the city they already have grown up girls, fit enough to be mothers of two or three children, going to the universities?' (K.p.29)

Like Gandhi, Moorthy wants to bring changes and doesn't like social pollution. Yet he propagates Hindu-Muslim unity. As a result many social taboos are overthrown by educated people and picture of rural areas begins to change.

Like Rangamma, people want to know the secrets of astronomy. They want to know — what is beyond the sun and the moon. A few villagers come to know about the life style of the people of Lahore, Kabul, Bombay and

Bukhara. They feel shocked to know that women are liberated beings in Europe.

Yet the rural people of Kanthapura don't know anything about Renaissance Movement, Reformation Movement, Industrial Revolution, French Revolution, Bolshevik Revolution etc. and continue to lead a simple life. Being uneducated, they are however cultured people having faith in *The Bhagwadgita*, *The Vedas*, *The Upanishads* etc. They follow the old traditions of life and don't know ways to get freedom. At times they come closer to Malgudi people and Anand's people of Kangra hills. There is no denying the fact that these villagers of Kanthapura follow the dictates of Gandhi faithfully. After getting inspiration from Moorthy, they forget the caste differences and freely mix up with the Sudras. Here Raja Rao breaks the traditional caste barriers. In the name of modern facilities, they enjoy the benefit of a post-office.

Often Raja Rao leaves the main thread of the plot and delivers moral lectures to advocate Gandhism and fundamentals of *The Gita*. Moorthy tells them:

'There is but one force in life and that is Truth, and there is but one love in life and that is the love of mankind, and there is but one God and that is the God of all. (K.p.35-36)

Like Hanuman, Moorthy obeyed the orders of Gandhi and followed the policies of non-possessiveness and detachment. He had twenty-seven acres of wet land and fifty-four acres of dry land and a garden. In addition to this he possessed a mango garden and a small coffee plantation. Like Gandhi, he liberated himself from his worldly possessions and devoted himself for the noble cause. Yet he loses temper when Bhatta spreads the rumour in Kanthapura that all the villagers shall be excommunicated. Moorthy courageously faces such evil-doers as he is morally strong. He never flirts with Pariah women as Bhatta knows. But his mother becomes restless and trusts the rumour — her son is going to be excommunicated. Now she wishes to die in Banaras or Gaya before this excommunication takes place. But she feels consoled when her doubts come to an end. The villagers know for sure that Moorthy has brought no disgrace to the village. (K.p.43)

Bhatta laments:

'Oh this Gandhi! Would he were destroyed! (K.p.45)

Yet wishes of Bhatta remain unfulfilled because the villagers are fed up with his cunning activities. Apart from making political propaganda, Gandhi attached due importance to rural economy and social reconstruction. And he wanted to make it possible only through education. For this he asked the Congress Volunteers to return to

villages and teach Hindi, grammar, Arithmetic etc. to the villagers and Moorthy followed this order too. (K.p.47)

While satirizing the feudal lords Raja Rao remarks:

'The Sahib says that if you work well you will get sweets and if you work badly you will get beaten — that is the law of the place. (K.p.50)

He knew that these Sahibs had their own snobberies and often robbed the chastity of women. Regarding the lechery of the new Sahib of Skeffington Coffee State a woman says:

'... Sometimes when the weeds are being pulled or the vermin killed, he (new Sahib) wanders into the plantation with his cane and pipe and puppy, and when he sees this wench of seventeen or that chit of nineteen, he goes to her, smiles at her, and pats her on her back and pats on her breasts ... he lies down there and then ... when the thing is over, he takes her to his bungalow and gives her a five-rupee note ...' (K.p.59)

Even a few Brahmin women failed to escape from this sexual harassment. Since Sahibs had relations with the British officers, the police authorities ignored such acts of lechery. A classless society was to be established to protect people from tyranny and exploitation and education was needed for that. It was hoped that people would get dignity after independence. This nationalism inspired Indian people to fight for freedom. With newspapers they knew — Pt. Nehru, Gandhi, C.R. Das, etc. had been arrested several times and the British government made efforts to control Indian affairs. Once Moorthy boldly told the police officer:

'Coolies are men, Police Sahib. And according to the laws of your own Government and that of Skeffington no man can own another. I have every right to go in. They have every right to speak to me. (K.p.62)

This confirms that freedom fighters were conscious of their rights — right to equality, right to liberty, right to get education, right against exploitation, right to follow any religion, right to property and right to get justice. With his art Raja Rao makes the people conscious that the time has come to demand their fundamental rights from the government. Many British authorities felt themselves unsafe in India as a lot of them were killed by the revolutionaries.

Still Gandhi opposed violence at every stage. He withdraws revolutions when his supporters followed violent means to terrorize the Britishers. Similarly Moorthy, a supporter of Civil Disobedience, opposes violence. When some of the villagers became violent, Moorthy fasted for three days to attain self-purification. 'The radiance of Ahimsa' (K.p.65) falls upon him and he

feels glimpse of self-illumination. Seenu and others fail to appreciate this step of Moorthy. Like R.N. Tagore, Moorthy does not think that God can be achieved with counting of beads in the temple. He knows that it is essential to understand terms such as renunciation, contentment, liberation, asceticism etc. to follow divine path. It is essential to love one's enemies to be a real human being. While meditating on God he offers prayers in all directions and seeks love everywhere. He calls it 'exaltation' (i.e. moral elevation). Critics accept the fact that Gandhi spiritualized politics. So Moorthy was never prepared to adopt foul means to achieve political ends. Like Kabir, he thinks of the 'city of love' (K.p.66) and then refers to the faith of child Prahlada in God. When Moorthy probes deep into his soul, he catches 'primordial radiance'. (K.p.66)

Moorthy suggests Rangamma:

'The great enemy is in us, ... hatred is in us If only we could not hate, if only we would show fearless, calm affection towards our fellow men, we would be stronger, and not only would the enemy yield, but he would be converted.' (K.p.69)

As he fasts, he grows a little weak physically and yet he doesn't complain about his problem. Actually inner strength guides him. He is prudent enough not to annoy the British authorities. He plans future of India as a free nation. The result is that India has friendly relations with Great Britain. He knows that hatred begets hatred. Like his mentor, he knows how to love enemies. Moorthy tells Ranga Gowda:

'Every enemy you create is like pulling out a lantana bush in your backyard. The more you pull out, the wider you spread the seeds ... (K.p.73)

CONCLUSION

Like Gandhi, he is an advocate of Panchayat system — Let the people follow the dictates of their Panchayat. In this democratic system, villagers needn't run towards cities for justice. The head of Panchayat is a follower of truth and non-violence and his soul rises above greed, selfishness, lust, lechery and other sins. Moorthy says:

'There is a huge Panchayat of all India called the Congress and that Congress belongs to the Mahatma and the Mahatma says every village in this country must have a Panchayat like that ... (KP.76)

S.S. Gill says that many theories of Gandhi could not be given practical shape by Congress leaders after 1945. Then Gandhi was not often consulted on major political issues and he remained silent. Panchayats have been established

in every village but the heads of Panchayats never speak the truth. Quite often elections of Panchayats create violence. Gandhi had not hoped for such violence due to his innocent nature.

Ranga Gowda admired Moorthy for his wisdom. The local Congress committee members decided that they would support the rule of law in the country. Due to people's enthusiasm in the activities of Congress, Bhatta felt restless:

'Yet nobody could check the popularity of Gandhian principles. Seenappa, Lakshamma, Ramanna, Satamma etc. followed doctrines of Moorthy. These villagers were optimistic and waited for the beginning of new era as Moorthy said: 'Let there be peace and love and order. As long as there is God in Heaven and purity in our hearts, evil cannot touch us....This is the true spirit of the Satyagrahi.' (K.p.88)

Yet the freedom fighters were arrested by the constables and thrashed badly. Due to their fortitude and zeal they tolerated this violence and regarded themselves the supporters of Gandhi.

As a result students formed a Defense Committee to protect truth and non-violence. After all it was struggle for national freedom. They had continence, austerity and control of breath. (K.p.90) Villagers extended support to freedom fighters. They organized meetings to make new plans for the freedom of freedom fighters. By this time Khaddar became popular in India and Volunteers appeared in Khadi-Kurta and Gandhi-cap. The gates of Hindu temple were opened for Parihas. Sankar led the masses as he wanted to put an end to the 'rule of Ravana'. (K.p.92)

The unknown Saint said:

'... but if the white men shall leave us tomorrow it will not be Ram-Rajya, we shall have but the rule of the ten-headed Ravana. (K, p. 92)

But this forecast proved to be false as power was transferred to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Pt. J.L. Nehru, Maulana Azad, and other noble political leaders. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was asked to form the constitution of India along with many politicians. In 1952 fair elections were conducted in the country for the Parliament. Parliamentary form of democracy was followed. Seven fundamental rights were given to the people. The Supreme Court was accepted as the defender of constitution. Universities, hospitals etc. were established in general interest. Zamindari system was abolished by Pt. Nehru. A lot of industries were established for producing basic goods for citizens. Situation started changing just after 1947. Now India had her own status as a free country. Secularism was adopted by the central government and all religions were

given equal status. The positive vision of Raja Rao is not admired by Swami, Bhatta, New Sahib etc. Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand made all possible efforts to shatter the caste barriers and succeeded in their mission.

The remarkable fact is that Gandhi is not a character in this novel and yet affects all the major events and main characters. He can be regarded the life-force of *Kanthapura*. Sankar aptly said: 'Some day he will do holy deeds. (K, p. 97)

Some volunteers admired Gandhi's the newspaper *Young India*. They accept his principles. The views of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Chitranjan Das, Motilal Nehru, Lala Har Dayal, Subhash Chandra Bose etc. were also appreciated by the citizens. People realized that British government had been harsh towards leaders and fake cases had been framed to torment them. Sankar advocated that Hindi should be accepted as the national language of free India. Secondly, the fanatics were not allowed to disobey ethical laws. At times the freedom fighters hear stories regarding Chandrashekar Azad, Ram Prasad Bismil, Bhagat Singh, Lala Lajpat Rai and other freedom fighters and become restless. Raja Rao emphasizes that the blood of martyrs does not go waste as it inspires new fighters to continue fighting for Swaraj.

The freedom fighters of *Kanthapura* felt sad and shocked on the death of Ramakrishnaya as there was none to fill up his place. In this novel Raja Rao asserts that even the villagers were interested in *The Vedas* and *The Puranas* though they failed to read them. They had often heard stories of adventures of Rani Laxmi Bai. Here Rangamma asserts *The Gita's* theory: 'the sword can kill the body and not the soul.' (K, p. 110)

As Moorthy comes out of prison, he leads villagers for a life of 'action' — A single man can't get success in such matters and hence he asks all the volunteers to get united. The hope of freedom was to be made a reality and India was yet to be accepted as the shrine of freedom. Here Raja Rao refers to Gandhi's Dandi March because the British government framed rules regarding salt taxation. Despite all security Gandhi broke the law though a lot of volunteers had to pay a heavy price. Now the momentum was high and the people hoped that the Britishers would leave India soon.

These days the British government earned a lot of excise duty from the sale of toddy and wine. Moorthy inspired all the volunteers to take out a peaceful march in favor of total prohibition. Female volunteers cooperated with him though the police authorities arrested many volunteers. Nobody bothered for the blows that he/she got now. Moorthy regarded it 'the victory of the heart'. (K, p.130)

The lathi-charge fails to suppress the enthusiasm of the volunteers and they moved forward.

Ultimately the policy of suppression fails. Even the revenue collector finds himself helpless before the freedom fighters. For many days there is none to sow the seeds and cut the harvest. But the villagers of Rampur, Siddapur, Maddur etc. are fully awakened by this time. Wine and toddy are condemned by all. People regard Gandhi as the 'King' of Kanthapura. Moorthy is released from the prison and tells villagers that his companions are fine inside the jail.

Thus, *Kanthapura* is a socio-political treatise on the freedom struggle of India. Secondly, all the principles of Gandhi are analyzed here. Thirdly, this novel is a criticism of life of pre-independence days. (1925-1947).

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