



## The Socio-Political Contemplation of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Raja Rao is one of the pioneer of Indian fiction in English, and in this regard his name is usually associated with the name of Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan. “Roughly contemporary with Mulk Raj Anand and R.k Narayan” says Iyengar, “Raja Rao makes with them a remarkable triad, affiliated with them in time and sometimes in the choice of themes but not in his art as a novelist or in his enchanting prose style”(Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, 1973: 386). Unlike the other two, he has not been a prolific writer, and his literary output is rather small. In a writing career spanning over seventy years, besides one volume of short stories entitled *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947), he has so far written only six novels, namely, *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and the Shakespeare* (1965), *Comrade Kirillov* (1976), *The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988), and *On the Ganga Ghat* (1993). The regular and perennial student of philosophy and also a teacher of the subject at the University of Texas, America, Raja Rao is deeply concerned with spiritual values, and his “passionate attachment to the Indian ethos has, curiously enough, been actually strengthened by his long exile from India since 1929 when he sailed for France to do research on the mysticism of the west” (M.K Naik, *A History of English Literature*, 1982: 166). His profound commitment to non-dualism, *Advaitbad*, leaves no one in doubt that here is a writer who has been plumbing the mysteries and complexities of *Vedanta*.

In the course of an interview Raja Rao speaks of his ‘peculiar style’, and goes on to say: “I have no readers in view at all. I write for myself” (D.S Rao ed. *Indian Literature*, vol.xxxi, 114:1988). And he proceeds in the same vein when he says: “I take writing as a *sadhana*, a spiritual *sadhana*. That is why I write so little and take a long time to complete my text”(D.S Rao ed. *Indian Literature*, vol.xxxi, 114:1988). He further states: “I try to say something for myself, and if that is interesting to me, it would be interesting to the public. I don’t think to the public as such. May be that is why I write difficult books”(D.S Rao ed. *Indian Literature*, vol.xxxi, 118:1988). Raja Rao maintains: “Communication for me is that which gets communicated to me.

That's all" (D.S Rao ed. Indian Literature, vol.xxxi, 118:1988). The interviewer asks him a very significant question relating to a writer's comment:

Rangrat: There is another thing we hear these days. It is about the author's commitment. It is often said that every author must be a committed writer. Do you also subscribe to this view? If so, whom do you think the writer should be committed to?

Raja Rao: I cannot say about others. But I am committed to *Advait Vedanta*. I am a *sadhaka*.

(D.S Rao ed. Indian Literature, vol.xxxi, 119:1988)

And on being asked if at all he wrote poetry at any point of time, he says that through he never wrote poetry, people regard his prose as poetic.

According to Raja Rao, his prose style is rather peculiar; he does not write English like an Englishman: in fact we Indians cannot and should not do so; he has tried to reshape English for his needs; he looks upon writing as spiritual *sadhana*; he considers every word to be a mantra; communication is that which gets communicated to him, and he is committed to *Advait Vedanta* as a *sadhana*.

*Kanthapura* is Raja Rao's first published novel. It is different from his other novels, for a while, besides other things, it is also a novel of physical or surface action, they hardly contain anything of physical action; in fact, what we find in them may at best called intellectual or spiritual action. *Kanthapura* is a remote, obscure village, "highly up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar Coast" (*Kanthapura* 7), with *Himavathy* as its deified river and *Kenchamma* as its presiding deity. It is a Gandhian novel, for what is recorded in it is the impact on this village of India's freedom struggle waged against the British rule under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. "The theme of *Kanthapura* may be summed up as Gandhi and our village; it is a veritable Grammar of the Gandhian myth" (Iyenger, *Indian Writing in English*. 1973, 391), and it would "always have a central place in Gandhi literature" (Iyenger, *Indian Writing in English*. 1973, 396).

The central figure in *Kanthapura* is Moorthy, "as honest as an elephant" (*Kanthapura* 18), as noble as cow, "quiet, generous, serene, deferent and Brahminic, a very prince" (*Kanthapura* 12) as it were, who despite protests and insinuations from certain quarters, does not believe in untouchability or caste distinctions, who practices the Gandhian ideology of truth, non-violence and non-violent non-co-operation, and who is hailed, by and large, as the village Mahatma. He, a young Brahmin, "is one of those Gandhi-men who say there is neither caste nor family, and yet they pray like us and they live like us. Only they say, too, one should not marry early, one should allow widows to take husbands and Brahmin might marry a pariah and pariah a Brahmin" (*Kanthapura* 19). Besides untouchability, prohibition on early marriage, re-marriage of widows and inter-caste marriages, Moorthy does also interest on spinning khadi, for, like Shiva, "Swaraj

too is three-eyed: Self-Purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, Khaddar” (Kanthapura 20). He spells out reasons for the propagation and promotion of khadi, and in this regard tells people:

... millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us. To wear cloth spun and woven with your own God given hands is sacred, says the Mahatma. And it gives work to the workless, and work to the lazy.... Our country is being bled to death by foreigners. We have to protect our Mother. (Kanthapura 29)

And on being told that there are already weaver, such as Chennayya and Rangayya, in the village and that Brahmins need not spin, he comes out with his own argument, saying: “they buy foreign yarn, and foreign yarn is brought with our money, and all this money goes across the oceans. Our gold should be in our country. And our cotton should be in our country” (Kanthapura 29).

Moorthy has never seen Gandhi; Gandhi has never visited Kanthapura; Moorthy has had only “a vision of the Mahatma, might and God-beaming” (Kanthapura, 1971: 52) and it is this very dream that has prompted him to give his college studies. He throws away his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire, and return to his village, a Gandhi’s man, to launch the Gandhian movement there in order to lend support and strength to India’s struggle for freedom from the Red- Man’s rule. He is, and should be, thinks Moorthy, what Hanuman is said to be to Rama. Since Kanthapura is an Indian Village, fed on religious beliefs and values, it would be difficult to separate politics from religion, and that is why the *Shankara-jayanthi*, the Rama festival, the Krishna festival and the Ganesh festival are celebrated in the village, and *Harikathas* are organized there. All these celebrations and festivals are inspired by political motivation, so much so that the story of Gandhi’s birth is presented in the form of a religious myth, involving Brahma, Shiva and the sage, Valmiki, and that Gandhi is hailed as “a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man” (Kanthapura 23), the very incarnation of God, who has descended to the earth to “fight against the enemies of the country” (Kanthapura 22). However, it is at this point in the novel that the Government steps in through the policeman Bade Khan to keep a close watch on the situation and to take necessary action against the freedom fighters.

It is quite understandable that in the politically charged atmosphere of Kanthapura Bade Khan is not provided with any accommodation there and that he has to reside in the neighbouring Skeffington Coffee Estate where the coolies, men, women and children, are exploited and tortured and deprived of the basic necessities of life. As a policeman it is Bade Khan’s duty to inform his higher authorities of all the developments taking place in and around Kanthapura. In the meantime, Moorthy is elected President of the village Congress Panchayat Committee, with Patel Range Gowda, Rangamma, Seenu and Rachanna as its members. On this occasion Patel Range Gowda hails Moorthy as our Gandhi and says:

The state of Mysore has a Maharaja, but that Maharaja has another Maharaja who is in London, and that one has another one in Heaven, and so everybody has his own

Mahatma, and this Moorthy, who has been caught in our knees playing as a child, is now grown-up and great, and he has wisdom in him and he will be our Mahatma. (Kanthapura, 1971: 109)

However, there is another small faction in Kanthapura, led by Bhatta and Venkamma, which is severely critical of Moorthy and is out to malign him in all possible ways.

Bhatta is the first Brahmin of Kanthapura; he is “very learned in his art”(Kanthapura, 1971: 36), and though he begins his life “with a loin-cloth at his waist, and a cooper pot in his hand” (Kanthapura, 1971: 35), he grows richer and richer by lending money to people on increasingly higher rates of interest. He ceases to be “a pontifical brahmin” (Kanthapura, 1971: 38), and becomes a land- owner. Bhatta is a shrewd person, acquisitive and pretentious, a tout almost, who spreads the rumor that the swami has excommunicated Moorthy, which, not unnaturally, causes his devout mother, Narsamma’s death out of sheer shock. Bhatta has nothing to do with the Congress, Gandhi, or Swaraj, and speaks sarcastically of the Gandhi vagabondage in relation to the congress volunteers’ activities. Waterfall Venkamma is angry with Moorthy because he has refused to marry her daughter, and, expectedly enough, she dismisses him as a “good-for-nothing fellow” (Kanthapura 56) and “a pariah-mixer” (56). However, in spite of all criticism and intimidation, Moorthy pursues his political mission firmly and with determination. Seenu, a member of Kanthapura Congress Panchayat Committee, takes upon himself the responsibility of educating his co-villagers, the pariahs in particular, while Moorthy decides to move over to the Skeffington Coffee Estate to educate the people, especially the coolies, there as well as to study the situation obtaining in the area.

Taking due notice of the disturbance and violence affecting Kanthapura and its neighborhood, Moorthy goes on foot for three days, and thereafter the local people organize bhazans to celebrate the event. He feels emboldened by the public response, and launches the “Don’t-touch-the-Government-Campaign” (Kanthapura 99). Surely enough, he is about to be arrested. In the course of his address to the people, Moorthy states:

Brothers, in the name of the Mahatma, let there be peace and love and order. As long as there is a God in Heaven and purity in our hearts evil cannot touch us. We hide nothing. We hurt none. And if these gentlemen want to arrest us, let, let them. Give yourself up to them. That is the true spirit of the Satyagrahi... the Mahatma has often gone to prison... (Kanthapura 122)

Moorthy and seventeen other men of Kanthapura are arrested, but while others are let off after severe thrashing, the leader is detained for trial. The secretary of the Karwar Congress Committee, Advocate Sankar, is willing to defend Moorthy, and so is Advocate Ranganna, but Moorthy declares “... if truth needs a deference, God himself would need one, for as the Mahatma says Truth is God, and I want no soul to come between me and truth” (Kanthapura 126). Advocate Sankar, a truthful and noble person that he is, agrees with Moorthy as he says:

Well, Moorthy, if such be your decision, my whole soul is with you. Gandhi ji says a Satyagrahi needs no advocates. He is his own advocate. And how many of us did go to prison in 1921 and never had touched the shadow of an advocate. I am an advocate, you will say, but you know I am an advocate for only those who cannot defend themselves. (Kanthapura 126)

The whole of Kanthapura, the Skeffington Coffee Estate and Harwar is in a state of turmoil; even in the face of intense repressive measures people are defiant and ready for making any sacrifice; the cries of Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai, VandeMataram and InquilabZindabad rend the air; people, men and women, remember such great patriots and leaders as Bal GangadharTilak, ChittaranjanDas, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Kamali Devi and AnniBasant to encourage one another; Vasudev of the Skeffinton Coffee State plunges into active politics, and Volunteer Corps of the women of Kanthapura, led by Rangamma and Ratna, is duly formed. Moorthy's case gets a wide coverage in the press, but the saintly accused is sentenced to three months rigorous imprisonment. As a gesture of support to Moorthy, people observe fast. In the meantime Range Gowda is deprived of his Patelship, and Bhatta leaves quietly for kashi.

“Rangamma is no village kid” (Kanthapura 48); she is a god women and a pious soul, and she is intelligent and wise enough to connect *Vedanta* with nationalism. As Ratna reads the Vedantic texts, relating particularly to *Vidya* and *Avidya*, Rangamma offers her own interpretation, saying “if for the thorny pit the illusion fall into, you put the foreign Government, and for the soul that searches for liberation, you put our India, everything is clear” (Kanthapura 147-48). Similarly, for the Karwar Congress Committee, declares “Hindi would be the national language of India, and though Kannada is good enough for our province, Hindi must become the national tongue” (Kanthapura 143). In her turn, Ratna, though a young widow, defies social taboos; she is one “who not only went about the streets like a boy, but even wore her hair to the left like a concubine, and she still kept her bangles and her nose-rings and ear-rings, and when she was asked why she behaved as though she hadn't lost her husband, she said that was nobody's business, and that if the sniffing old country hens thought that seeing a man for a day, and this when one is ten years of age, could be called a marriage, they had better eat mud and drown themselves in the river” (Kanthapura 48-49). And as for the people who “were saying she was found openly talking to Moorthy in the temple, and alone too—well, let them say what they like” (Kanthapura 49). However, the truth is that Ratna is dedicated freedom fighter, and move and works, shoulder to shoulder, with Rangamma. And when Moorthy retunes to Kanthapura from prison, he declares “we are out for action” (Kanthapura 170).

In Kanthapura men and women are ready for action. In the city of Karwar people have already formed defense committees and volunteer groups, but what is far more important is the fact that they have fanned out to various places, including Knathapura, to carry on their activities. References are made to Ramrajya and Kalyuga, to Gandhi as Harishchandra and “The Mountain”(Kanthapura 176), to Moorthy as “the small mountain” (Kanthapura 177) and to the

freedom fighters as “the pilgrims of the Mountain” (Kanthapura 176). However, Moorthy knows more than others that the Red-Man’s Government would act ruthlessly against the agitators, “the soldier saints” (Kanthapura 181), and that is why both as a warning and reminder, he tells them:

...remember each one of you is responsible for the harm done by another, and the first time violence is done against the police or those that are not with us, we shall stop the Movement and wait for six months and more in penance and in prayer that our sins may be purified. Brothers and sisters, remember we are not out to fight the white man or the white man’s slaves, the police and the revenue officers, but against the dominic corruption that has entered their hearts, and the purer we are the greater will be our victory, for the victory we seek is the victory of the hearts. Send out love where there is hatred... (Kanthapura 180)

And he goes on to say “...remember always, the path we follow is the path of the Spirit, and with truth and non-violence and love shall we add to the harmony of the world” (Kanthapura 181). Both the Government and the people are in readiness to face each other in their own ways.

As and when the Mahatma is arrested following the Dandi march, people go into action. Today shops and opium shops and cigarette shops and brothels are everywhere picketed, and the demonstrators declares that they would not pay the revenue tax. The local administration comesa out with its own repressive measures. All the leading figures are arrested and taken away to prison; the demonstrators are mercilessly assaulted; a number of them are also shot dead; the houses in Kanthapuraare either destroyed or burnt to ashes, and most of the people either go in hiding or find shelter in otherwise safe places. The lands of those who have not paid the revenue tax have either been legally attached or are about to be auctioned. Bhatta sells away his land and goes back to kasha. Range Gowda visits Kanthapura but once, supposedly, to collect the ornaments that lie buried there. Kanthapura is utterly deserted “there seems to be not a beating pulse (Kanthapura 247)” in the village or, as Ranga Gowda puts it, “there’s neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura” (258). Most of the woman from Kanthapura seek refuge at various places, including a place called Kashipura.

Mahatma Gandhi makes truce with the victory, and is released from the prison. Moorthy and Rangamma and others are also released. Ratnareceives a letter from,Moorthy, and she leaves for Bombay to see him there. It is hoped that things would change. As Moorthy writes in his letter:

Jawaharlal will change it. You know Jawaharlal is like a Bharata to the Mahatma, and he too, is for non-violence, and he, too, is a Satyagrahi, but he says in Swaraj there shall be neither the rich nor the poor. And he calls himself an equal distributionist and I am with him and his men. (Kanthapura 256-57)

The Mahatma is to go to the Red-man’s country for talks, and the objective is to get independence or Swarj for the country:

He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. (Kanthapura 57)

And it is with an invocation to Goddess Kenchamma and the Siva of the Promontory that the novel comes to a close.

Kanthapura does have its own importance as a work of fiction, for it is an authentic account of an Indian village, and is also one of the finest expressions of Indian sensibility, of Indian peasant sensibility. And yet, it is its narrative style that “makes it more a Gandhi- Purana than a piece of mere fiction” (Iyengar58). In his Foreword to Kanthapura Raja Rao says:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala- purana, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village—Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles. With the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell. (5)

And he goes on to say:

We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are paths interminable. The Mahabharatha has 2, 14, 778 verses and the Ramayana 48,000. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous ‘ats’ and ‘ons’ to bother us—we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stops our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling. I have tried to follow it myself in this story. (Kanthapura 60)

The story in the novel is narrated by an old grandmother, obviously, to a stranger or a new visitor to the place, and what Raja Rao does is to adopt the Indian oral tradition of story-telling. It is indeed remarkable to see that the village, its people and its neighborhood are made quite vivid and alive. There are several segments of the village; the Brahmin quarter, the potters’ quarter the weavers’ quarter, the sudra quarter and the pariah quarter are there, besides the surrounding hills, and, what is more, we are also introduced in the book to such typical Indian characters as Waterfall Venkamma, Temple Lakshamma, Corner- House Moorthy, Front-House Akkamma, Jack-tree Tippa, Postmaster Suryanarayana, PatwariNanjundia, Patel Range Godwa, Coffee-Planter Ramayya and Carpenter Kenchayya. These characters are readily identified, characteristically enough, either by the location of their residence or by their position or

occupation. It is also important to take due note of the fact that in this novel Raja Rao breaks the formal or established rules of English syntax and imparts “a completely different, in this case Kannada, intonation to the English sentence” (C.D Narsimhah’s Introduction to Raja Rao, Kanthapura 1974: xvi).

And when the night is over, and the sun rises over the Babbur Mound, people will come from Santur and Kapur, people will come from the Santur Coffee Estate and the Kappur Cardamom Estate, from coconut gardens and sugarcane fields, and they will bring flowers and fruit and rice and dal and sugar-candy and perfumed sweetmeats, and we shall offer you all, dancing and singing—the bells will ring, the trumpets tear through the groves, and as the camphor rises before yo, we shall close our eyes and hymn your praises. Kenchamma, Great Goddess, protect us! O Benign One! (Kanthapura 10)

This is an instance of poetic prose in the novel, but there are also instance of irony and humor in it. Bhatta of Kanthapura is a greedy, selfish and dishonest person, and yet he is ‘the first Brhamin’ (35) of the village. He is not a bad man, and still he is not interested in the Gandhi-bhajan because there is ‘no money in it’ (41).

Nevertheless, there are certain aspects of or ingredients in Kanthapura that do not quite satisfy us. It seems rather incongruous that such an idealist and God-fearing man as Moorthy plunges straightway into action: perhaps, he is so much idealized that he is supposed to be fit or suitable only for visions or dreams, and not at all for action. Moreover, the novelist’s, breath-takingly long sentences, his mannered prose and the frequent repetitions of terms and names of people and places, whatever the justification, do generate a kind of jarring effect which, at least to some extent, dilutes the pleasure of reading this book. Ratna is a character whose potentials—her sense of rebellion, her stubbornness, and her penchants for action—should have been properly and adequately exploited; but somehow or other, this is not done, with the result that she remains a weak character, a character with no individual status or identity of her own. At best, she is only an appendage to Moorthy or Rangamma. And finally, we do not have a sense fulfillment as we close the book, perhaps because the story seems to have been left unfinished, and perhaps also because the picture of the deserted village and the invocation to Goddess Kenchamma do not go well with each other.

There are at least, says C.D Narasimaiah, “three strands of experience in the novel: the political, the religious and the social, and all the three are woven inextricably into the one complex story of Kanthapura” (C.D Narsimhah’s Introduction to Raja Rao, Kanthapura 1974: vii). Kanthapura may or may not be a minor classic; it may have its own points of strength and weakness; however, one thing is clear that Kanthapura is India in microcosm, and that what happens there did also happen at several other places in India during the twenties and thirties of the last century in the course of our struggle for freedom under Gandhi’s leadership. Kanthapura reflects the socio-political changes that took place in the country during the period of Independence struggle. There is a crusade against untouchability; temples are being thrown open to the pariahs;



intercaste marriages and widow remarriages are being encouraged, and there is a growing tussle between the femalefolk and society for the emancipation of women from traditional bondages and compulsions. In fact, this novel is a message, a persuasion, an opportunity, and it seeks to enlarge the frontiers of human awareness. Freedom from the British or Red-man's rule through non-violence and Satyagraha is indeed the main motif of the novel, and what Moorthy does is "to shake the village out of its complacency and put it on the map of Kanthapura and India" (C.D Narsimhah's Introduction to Raja Rao, Kanthapura 1974: viii). It is absolutely no surprises that in the novel Rangamma reads such papers and journals as the *Tainadu*, *Viswakarnataka*, *Deshbandhu* and *Jayabharatha*, shares information with others, and interprets with others, and interprets even the Vedantic texts in political terms. The freedom fighters speak of Tilak, C.R. Das, Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Annie Besant and others; they speak of the Solders' Revolt of 1857 and Gandhi's Dandi March to break to break the Salt Law, and they sing songs in praise of the two great sons of India, Jatin Das and Bhagat Singh, who lived and died only for the freedom of their country.

The kind of mythic parallelism we come across in Kanthapura points to "that incomparable manner in which Gandhi tapped the deeply religious and spiritual resources of people living in the remotest parts of India and built up a national movement in a lifetime" (C.D Narsimhah's Introduction to Raja Rao, Kanthapura 1974: ix). Gandhi is Rama; Nehru is Bharatha; India is Sita; the Red-man is the ten-headed Ravana, and just as Rama killed Ravana and brought Sita back to Ayodhya, similarly the Mahatma will throw out the British rulers and make India free.

Knathapura is indeed different from other Indian novels in English.

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