



The Foretaste of Indian Nationalism: A Study of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

Dr. Rohidas Nitonde,

Assistant Professor of English

Shri Shivaji College,

Parbhani (MS) 431 401.

Raja Rao:

Raja Rao was born in orthodox Brahmin's family in Hassana, Karnataka on November 5, 1908. His father was a Professor of Canaresse in Hyderabad. He matriculated from Hyderabad. He went over to Aligarh for his higher education. After getting B.A. degree from Nizam College, Hyderabad he did his research work at the University of Montpellier, and University of Sorborne. After his stay in France from 1928 to 1939, he returned to India on the outbreak of World War II, in 1940; again he went to France in 1946 and lived there till 1956. He was invited by the University of Texas to teach Philosophy there. He went to America and got interested in it. He taught Vedantic and Buddhist philosophy at the University of Texas. Rao died on July 8, 2006 at his home in Austin, Texas (USA) at the age of ninety seven.

Rao's Works:

While in France Rao wrote his first novel *Kanthapura* (1938). He published his collection of stories entitled *The Cow of the Barricades* in 1947 in France. His second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* was published after a gap of twenty two years. His *The Serpent and the Rope* is reflection of the Indian culture and philosophy. He got name and fame. He received national and international recognition for his *The Serpent and*



the Rope, he won the Sahitya Academi Award (1964), and Government of India honoured him with the Padma Bhushan Award (1969), and Padma Vibhushan in 2007.

Kanthapura:

This section intends to acquaint learners with the text. Our aim is that after reading this section students should read the original text in detail and then continue the rest of the sections of this material. The present section gives the outline story of the novel. It is further divided into three sub-sections.

Kanthapura is about a south Indian village named Kanthapura. Kanthapura is a village with all its living topography and the people are divided on the caste basis. The novel has a romantic setting with the classical ruggedness of the places surrounded it. Kanthapura is a village in Mysore in the Province of Kera. It is situated in the valley of Himarathy. There is the cool Arabian, sea, up the Malabar Coast. It is the agrarian village. The forests about the place add to the romantic tone of the village. Forests of teak and jack, of sandal and of sal. The passes and gorges are there. The romantic topography has the tragic centre in the peoples of various shades.

The plot of *Kanthapura* has a beginning, a middle and an end. It begins with an account of the small south Indian village, Kanthapura, its locale, its crops, its poverty and the ignorant and superstitious nature of the villagers. Kanchamma is the village Goddess. The characters in the novel play significant roles in action of the novel. The petty rivalries and jealousies of the villagers are shown powerfully. There is development of action with the arrival of Moorthy from the city. The action is centered round Moorthy.

Gandhian Idea of Return to Village:

Moorthy's return to his native village, Kanthapura, from the city where he had gone to study in a university. So let's start with Moorthy's return to the village. If you read the novel you will see that the narrator here is an elderly Brahmin lady of the



village Kanthapura. And it is important to remember this because the novel uses the unique perspective of this narrator, Achakka, to subtly undercut the Gandhianism that Moorthy represents.

We see this in play quite early in the novel when Achakka introduces to the reader her native village of Kanthapura and its inhabitants. While talking about the Brahmin quarters, Achakka mentions a character called Doré who was from Kanthapura but who had then gone to the city to become a “university graduate”. Though he was not very successful in his studies, Achakka tells the reader that Doré picked quite a few habits in the city. He had, in Achakka’s words, developed “city ways, read city books, and even called himself a Gandhi-man”. Now this repeated stress on the word city both shows an effort by Achakka to underline the foreignness of these new ways and new books.

There are several things Moorthy does for villagers for example his attempts to popularize the use of charkha among the villagers. He becomes Gandhian instrument to promote the use khadi. Another important thing about Moorthy is that he opposes the age old caste system predominant in the village.

Moorthy’s return to the village is therefore marked less by the desire to accept the traditional ethos of the village life and more by the desire to transform the village population into a homogenous mass which can then be directed against the colonial authority.

Representation of Mass Based Nationalism:

In this novel Moorthy manages to kindle within the villagers a spirit of nationalism and transform them into a united opposition to the colonial authority by breaking the barriers of caste segregation and patriarchal narrowness. Yet a careful reading will reveal that the force of opposition and resistance that Moorthy kindles within the villagers does not automatically get directed against the British rule.



The Skeffington coffee estate is run by a British and the novel describes how Indians are brought there from all over the country with false promises of money and are then forced to work in the estate virtually as bonded labourers. In other words, the coffee estate is presented as a site of barbaric violence and exploitation where the line distinguishing between the British colonial exploiter and the poor Indian exploited is very clearly drawn. Moorthy's call to resist the oppressions of the authority of the exploitative white man thus finds ready acceptance among the labourers of the coffee estate and they rise to the occasion.

In the village of Kanthapura however, the patterns of oppression are more complex and though Moorthy tries to convince the villagers that the white man is exploiting them economically, for them the more real face of economic exploitation is the money-lender Bhatta. Now here the problem is that not only is Bhatta not a British coloniser he is also not a foreigner or even a city bred man. As the village priest, he is thoroughly integrated within the structure of the village life and Moorthy's discourse of anti-colonial nationalism fails to address the exploitation meted out by such Indian characters. In other words, though Moorthy recognises the economic exploitation that goes on between the coloniser and the colonised, he remains impervious to the class exploitation that goes on between one Indian and another.

Hence while reading the novel, one is never very sure whether the villagers' resistance is directed at the white man's government, which for most villagers remains a distant entity, or at the more immediate Indian exploiters like Bhatta and the revenue collector. After all, in spite of Moorthy's elaborate explanation of the way in which the white man is economically exploiting the Indians, the villagers like Ratna and Satamma find the most pleasure when they see the granary of Bhatta go up in flames because it is Bhatta and not any white man who lends them money at exorbitant rates and who starves them and their children of food. The novel in fact ends with Moorthy realising this class difference and class exploitation as the major source of crisis in the



Indian society and thus as an anti-colonial activist he finally changes his affiliation from Gandhian idealism to the Nehruvian dream of egalitarianism.

To Sum Up:

Kanthapura was published in 1938 *Kanthapura* was written in France, but it did not contain any trace of Rao's life and experience in that country. Rather in *Kanthapura*, we see Rao engaged with the transformative effect that Gandhi brought about in the social and political lives of Indians during the 1920s and 1930s. On the one hand, *Kanthapura* is an attempt to represent in fictional form the Gandhian discourse of nationalism which by the time Rao was writing his novel, had gained significant traction in India. But on the other hand it is also an attempt the trace the fault lines that run through the Gandhian discourse. So *Kanthapura* is simultaneously a representation and a critique of the Gandhian discourse.

References:

Iyengar, K.R., Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2004. Print

Naik, M.K., *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982. Print

Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. OUP, Bombay, 1947.