

Glimpses of the Gandhian Nationalist Movement in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract

Raja Rao was one of the most prominent writers of India who is well known for his novels and short stories. Sahitya academy award winner Raja Rao is known for his nationalist writing, too. He actually participated in the 1942 Quit India Movement. As a result of it his engagement with the Nationalist Movement is easily witnessed in his novel *Kanthapura*. He was thoroughly influenced by Gandhi's teaching of non violent resistance against the British Rulers. In his debut novel, *Kanthapura*, he reflects his deep musings on Gandhian Nationalist Movement. This novel is also considered as the first classic and major Indian novels in English. Though fictitious it has the great essence of reality because it reflects the contemporary socio-political ethos of India. It is a representative village which reflects the contemporary reaction of the villagers to the Nationalist Movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. In the novel Raja Rao particularly depicts the national struggle of the villagers of *Kanthapura* called for by Mahatma Gandhi. As for Raja Rao Gandhi's ideology is the way of life and truth is the prime principle for Moorthy, too, it is the ideology of Gandhi and Gandhian philosophy is the ultimate truth of life. The present paper emphasizes the glimpses of Gandhian National Movement as reflected in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.

Keywords: nationalist, Gandhian teaching, Gandhian movement, socio-political ethos, National struggle, *Kanthapura*

Kanthapura is a novel dealing with the impact of the Gandhian freedom struggle in the remote villages. It represents the social upheaval caused due to hegemony of the Britishers and the reaction of people to it. All over India the impact of Gandhian movement was felt and *Kanthapura* represents all the happenings in those stirring years from 1919 to 1931. The great impact of Gandhiji's non-violence and non co-operation movements was felt every where in India which is tapped in the novel in a representative manner.

Raja Rao depicts the gradual rise of Gandhian Nationalist Movement in *Kanthapura*. *Kanthapura* is a small village in South India with all its peculiarities. The setting of *Kanthapura* is the Western ghat's mountain range in Southwest India which has become the hub of spice trade of the Britishers. The village, with its peculiar ethnicity, is remarkable for its typical characters. The narrator of the novel Achakka, an elderly Brahmin woman has deep knowledge of the village and the villagers. She depicts in detail the history of the village, the people living there and the gods of the village. She introduces each and every character in detail with its own peculiarities. There are educated *brahmins*, common people like potters, weavers, peasants and pariahs. The two most powerful figures of the village are Bhatt and Range Gowda. Moorthy, the protagonist of the novel is the leader of the village. He is a young Brahmin who leaves the village *Kanthapura* to study in the city. There he gets influenced by Gandhian thoughts and gets spiritual strength from Gandhian thoughts

and when he comes back he has turned into a firm believer in the ways of Mahatma Gandhi.

One day, Moorthy finds a linga in Achakka's backyard which has been installed and the *brahmins* begin convening prayers for it. It is the beginning of all the activities of the village. Immediately after the installation, Moorthy begins collecting money from everyone in the village to have a Harikatha-man named Jayaramachar. Jayaramachar, "Today," he says, 'it will be the story of Siva and Parvati.' And Parvati in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! 'Siva is the three-eyed,' he says, 'and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar'" (p.10). Through Harikatha Gandhian movements are introduced to the villagers. It is an attempt of Moorthy to initiate the conversation about Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts and gradually builds the Gandhian movement in the village. Religion has played an important part in the Indian struggle for independence. All through the freedom struggle leaders, patriots and the freedom fighters of the contemporary India have manipulated the religious beliefs of Indians for the cause of nation. The religious sentiments of the villagers are fully exploited by Moorthy. Villagers start worshipping Shiva along with the local deity, Kenchamma. There is observance of Sankara Jayanthi, Sankara Vijaya. People get together in the festive mood. Thus it is a gradual shift of religious belief from local to national, as Lord Shiva is worshiped all over India. Moorthy becomes successful in manipulating the religious beliefs for the national cause. Recitals of Kathas and holding of Harikathas was a powerful means of spreading nationalist ideas which is used by Moorthy in the novel.

Eventually, people come to know about Mahatma Gandhi's promise to save India from foreign domination. Through various acts Moorthy tries to convince people the Gandhian way of living. He goes from door to door even in the Pariah quarters of the village and explains to the villagers the significance of Mahatma Gandhi's struggle for independence. Moorthy tries to explain the importance of spinning their own wool and weaving their own khadi cloth he explains how Gandhi believes that foreign goods are making India poorer. He convinces the villagers that to stop the impoverishment and to be independent weaving their wool is helpful and it is one of the ways to overcome the problem. Moorthy tries to explain that spinning wool is a kind of spiritual act according to Gandhi and finally he recruits people to spin their own khadi-cloth. Thus he proves to be a staunch supporter of the *Swadeshi* Movement. The movement initiated by Mahatma Gandhi was very influential which was one of the earliest socio-economic campaigns. The main aim behind it was to promote the indigenous textile industry. In this crusade Moorthy goes through various difficulties but finally he becomes successful in his motif.

Formation of the Congress Committee is another important step of moving towards the Gandhian Movement. Publicity begins by circulating free material and people are motivated to be volunteers of the Congress Committee. Awareness is created among them and they are given thorough training of non-violence and how to be non-violent especially in the face of government repression. It is yet another challenging task but with

the help of Range Gowda and the progressive young lady, Ratna Moorthy achieves success in this difficult task. Moorthy's fasting and advising people to love those who hate them, going to pariah colony or telling them importance of being truthful, Ratna's reading of Vedantic Script is nothing else but the Gandhian philosophy of sacrifice, truthfulness, untouchability and tolerance. By the leadership of Rangamma, Sevis, women brigade of volunteers is established in the village as was promoted by Gandhiji, nationwide. Moorthy continues to promote the ideas and ideals of Gandhism in his own way. Some of the villagers are reluctant but Moorthy receives support from most of the villagers. Bhatta is one of the main voices against Moorthy as he is afraid of losing his power as well as wealth. There is also the despised Bade Khan, Waterfall Venkamma, and a few others who hate the Gandhian ways of Moorthy.

Mahatma Gandhi's 'Dandi March' is also supported by the villagers under the guidance of Moorthy. Moorthy keeps them updated about Gandhiji's march. All the villagers promptly follow the action of going to the river and take bath as Mahatma had been to Dandi. It is an obedient gesture of the villagers to support every movement practiced by Gandhiji. Moorthy initiates another campaign and tells the villagers that toddy trees are owned by the Government and toddy booths are meant to exploit the poor people. The need of establishing parallel Government is also explained and they feel that Range Gowda will be appointed as their Patel, again. Moorthy is successful in establishing Gandhian philosophy to despise the vicious deeds and not the doer. He tells them that they should not hate the white men or their servants but the "...demonic 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 heart" (125). Like Mahatma Gandhi his message is "send out love where there is hatred"(126). They are attacked by the police while attacking the toddy estate but they follow the principle of non-violence. They feel more energetic and demonstrate their courage. It is the victory of Gandhi's preaching and strong belief in non-violence.

On the market day, under Moorthy's leadership, they march towards the toddy booth. As the workers come out and move towards the booths, Moorthy tells the villagers to squat down and lay down in front of the booth. The policemen are supporting the coolies and trying to tighten around the booth and beat the coolies forward, but coolies are unable to move further as they can not walk over the people. The volunteers begin to chant and the police begin to beat them, Moorthy is hit in the mouth. Even though they are beaten badly they do not move. The pots of water are thrown on them but, they refuse to be violent. This and many other incidents in the novel are the direct depiction of Gandhian Movements being practised successfully as the representative act that was practised all over India. In the last crusade the villagers give a tough fight but they are being forced to leave Kanthapura and take refuge in another village. Eventually Moorthy becomes a Nehru supporter. The dream of the villagers is lost but Achakka expresses her faith in Gandhi. In the end, the villagers remain dedicated to Gandhi and the promise of the Nationalist Movement.

The preparation started by Mahatma Gandhi for the struggle to be undertaken before Independence is powerfully depicted by Raja Rao. Gandhian philosophy aimed at socio-economic, and religious upliftment of the Indians for which he introduced certain programmes ; spinning our own wool with the help of the *charkha* and boycott of foreign clothes, Eradication of untouchability and other social evils, equal status to women and the untouchables, upliftment of villages and eradication of poverty, illiteracy, casteism and communal harmony. In his article on Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, C.D.Narasimaiah comments: "No book of this scope and size that I have read in English on this theme pictures so vividly, truthfully and touchingly the story of the resurgence of India under Gandhi's leadership; 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 our people in response to the call of one like Gandhi" (P 40).

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