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Role of religion in socio-political awakening in Raja Rao's Kanthapura: A brief study

Dr. Koushik Nath

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jagannath Singh College, Udharbond, Cachar, Assam, India

Abstract:

Religion seems to be the nucleus of socio-political regeneration in India during pre-independence era and it was aptly used by writers and social activists to rouse the slumbered soul of the segregated Indian society at large. They exploited the religious fables and festivals as instruments to educate and aware the masses about the contemporary socio-political ills and the ways to cope with those. Attainment of political goal (Swaraj) and social awakening through reforms stood complementary to one another. Raja Rao, in Kanthapura, records the same grip of religion over the society to rouse the conscience of the society at the socio-political ills and injustices which eclipsed Indian life during 1930s. Common masses started to practise social reformative activities such as eradication of untouchability, removal of caste system, rubbing out illiteracy, eliminate ignorance, do away with superstition, emancipation of women, freedom from the British economic exploitation by means of boycotting foreign goods, spinning yarn and wearing Khadi etc. Alongside social reforms and regeneration political awakening was witnessed in the village Kanthapura when Moorthy brings in the Gandhian Satyagraha Movement into the lives of the villagers. The village becomes part of the nationwide struggle against the British rule. Bhajans and Harikathas were arranged at the temple and other places to plant political ideas in the mind of people. Hindu mythology and contemporary politics were mingled to paint a picture of socio-economic picture under the British Raj.

Key words: Religion, Awakening, Harikatha, Freedom, Satyagraha.

Role of religion in the society: References to specific events in India such as the historic Dandi March and the breaking of the salt law in the late 1920s and early 1930s suggest that the novel has grown out of a distinct historical context pertaining to influence and propagation of Gandhian Programmes on the general Indians who are tradition-bound and deep-rooted conservatives by nature.

The novel rightly articulates the actions and issues encountered by the Kanthapurians when Moorthy, the central character, the Gandhi man enters the scene with the bundle of Gandhian practices. Now the villagers who are divided by castes, gender and religion

without any socio-economic and political awakening find it difficult to break the age-old shackles and embrace the message and practices as prescribed by Gandhi for ridding the society of all kinds of socio-economic and political ills.

Moorthy, in the line of Gandhi, is well aware of the grip of religion over the minds and actions of the simple conservative villagers and thereby initiates his job by installation of Linga and its consecration followed by reading of Sankara-Vijaya, holding of Sankara-Jayanti, the cycle of festivals -- Rama festival, Krishna festival and the grand Harikathas. The Harikatha-man, Jayaramachar, in order to draw the attention of the audience mixes religion with politics. His deliberations on Damayanti, Sakuntala and Yasodha follow his views about Swaraj. The complex political situation of the pre-independence era gets unfolded through the legends and religious stories of Gods. In this context, R.S. Singh opines that a "villager born and brought up in Indian tradition understands easily a contemporary problem if it is explained through a fable or an episode of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata or the Gita." Once the illiterate villagers come to terms with the efficacy of freedom, they find interest in politics and initiate a mass movement against the "Red-Man's Government." That is why, "the reading of a newspaper becomes as serious a discipline as the reverent reading of the Gita, and hand-spinning is elevated into a daily ritual like Puja. The walls of orthodoxy are suddenly breached: revolution comes as a flood and carries all before it." C.D. Narasimhaiah in keeping with the grip of religion over politics rightly says that the novel displays the dynamic power of a living religious tradition, for there is a tremendous religious activity in the novel. Again the description of the fight of Kenchamma, the Goddess with the demon makes the readers remind the tale of Goddess Durga killing the brute Mahisasura.

In the novel Achakka, the narrator, while articulating the saga of Kenchamma ventilated that she had to wage such a battle and she fought so many a night that the blood soaked and soaked into the earth and that is why, the Kenchamma Hill is red. The Kanthapurians take Kenchamma for their protector and resign all their issues to the will of Goddess Kenchamma. They invoke her grace and benedictions to destroy the Britishers in India. Having described the character of Mahatma Gandhi as the incarnation of Rama and Krishna, the narrator presents him as the liberator of Mother India from the rule of the demons, Ravana and Kansa. Further, the description of Gandhi's visit to England to attend the Round Table Conference in 1931 is likened to Rama's visit to Lanka to save Sita from the hands of Ravana. Like the description of battle between the 'suras' and 'asuras' in the Hindu mythology, *Kanthapura*, the novel articulates the fight between the Britishers (asuras) and the Indians (suras). The clash between the Satyagrahis and the supporters of the British symbolizes the clash between the 'suras' and the 'asuras'. The world of the Skeffington Coffee Estate is shown as the world of asuras in which corrupt British officials are found terrorizing the half-starved coolies and Mahatma Gandhi, the 'Sura' comes to rescue them with his 'Vanar Sena' the 'Satyagrahis'. These religious activities in turn enable the villagers to form a collective selfhood. Their commitment towards religion and love of religion fuels all other feelings in them and in the process facilitates construction of the

collective selfhood and identification of the other figured as the people of the British ruling community. C.D. Narasimhaiah rightly observes that the novel delineates the dynamic power of the living religious convention. He retorts, "religion seems to sustain the spirits of the people of Kanthapura."

Now gradually the villagers are introduced with Gandhi's day-to day practices such as embracing the principles of non-violence, love of mankind, abolition of untouchability, eradication of caste-system, Satyagraha, Sarvodaya, emancipation of women, mass literacy, Charka, Khadi etc. While embracing all these the villagers develop collective consciousness and get awakened socially, economically and politically. All such awakening ultimately make them fight the prevalent issues and connect them with the larger issue of freedom movement.

Social awakening: The caste hierarchy and the rigidities associated with it is a distinctive feature in the social life of Kanthapura. The village is divided into different sections on the basis of caste and the members of the lower strata are prohibited from any kind of interaction with the members of the superior caste.

Moorthy, in order to collect money for holding Harikathaas goes even to the Potters' quarter and the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter believing neither in caste nor clan nor family. Moorthy and other Gandhi men asserts one should not marry early; one should allow widows to take husbands and a Brahmin might marry a Pariah and a Pariah a Brahmin. Out of conservative mindset the others take it for the pollution of their tradition-bound world. Moorthy is threatened to be excommunicated by the traditional Brahministic attitude, but he remains active in his mission.

The novel records superstitious and orthodox attitude of the society where widows are not allowed to take husbands or come out of homely to embrace unconventional ways. The novel records resistance towards ideals of equality. Moorthy's initiation of Gandhi's programme of spinning yarn is noteworthy. Nanjamma vehemently protests against it, for it demeans a Brahmin to indulge in such manual labour. The villagers like Bhatta, a Brahmin are disgusted with this Gandhian vagabondage. But Moorthy stresses on the necessity of spinning the wheels for social awakening on the ground that it gives work to the workless, it prevents our money from going across the ocean and helps keeping our cotton in our country. In tune with the objective Moorthy says, "Because millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollute 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..." (Parthasarathy 19)

The novel records the emancipation of women of kanthapura from the age-old conservative forces to take active interest in politics at the time. Rachana and Range Gowda show how the people of lower castes picked up courage and accepted the voluntary restraint of non-violence; peasants refused to pay revenues and other taxes to the government. Rangamma and Ratna fight shoulder to shoulder with menfolk. Rangamma becomes the choice in the newly formed congress committee in the village. After Moorthy's arrest she

comes to the forefront, arranges for newspapers to be delivered from the city to keep the villagers informed of the activities of Congress in the rest of the country. Rangamma also forms a special group of women volunteers with the aim of serving the community and names it 'Sevika Sangha'.

The novel records the participation of all Kanthapurians in the use of *Charka* and *Khadi* as a concrete symbol of unity as well as practice of Swadeshi. The novel records the participation of illiterate coolies of Skeffington Coffee Estate in the art of weaving that teaches the dignity of labour and self-reliance. Moreover, Moorthy's emphasis on educating the coolies by teaching them alphabets, arithmetic and Hindi shows the concern for the upliftment of all.

The novel records the participation of all sections of people in the use of *Charka* and in understanding of the economy of *Khadi*. Moorthy asserts "Because millions millions of yarns of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollute us. To wear cloth spun and woven with your own god-given hands is sacred, and says Mahatma and it gives work to the workless, and work to the lazy ..." Moorthy explains when one buys foreign yarn, it is bought with country money and all this money goes across the oceans. But the gold of the land should be in the land along with the cotton of the land to keep the country bounteous and economically sound. Moorthy also wants the simple village women to involve themselves in economic activities so as to supplement income in the household. He wants them to eke out a living by spinning yarns, thereby making them economically independent. The Skeffington Coffee Estate near Kanthapura exemplifies the exploitative economic tendency of the British rulers. The Sahib stands for the paradise of the British colonial cruelty. Coolies' right to fair treatment is completely negated. The habit of drinking toddy, feasting etc. killed all the initiatives in them and turned them into slaves to the British masters. But the movement wave of 1930s comes over Kanthapura through Moorthy and the Satyagraha gains strength. The villagers go on protest marches and picket the local toddy shop to hinder the coolies from wasting their meagre earnings on liquor. Leaders like Moorthy were arrested but that did not weaken the spirit of revolt among the masses. A voluntary group of women called 'Sevika Sangha' was organised to continue the passive resistance against the British rule. Later, the release of Moorthy from the prison parked up the fighting spirit of the masses. They spontaneously pursued the 'Don't -touch - the Government campaign ' and the 'no-tax campaign' and thus contributed to Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement. In this way, a mass awakening was witnessed.

Political awakening: The novel records the glimpses of nationalism in the minds of Kanthapurians under the leadership of Gandhi. In order to aware the people of Kanthapura of political scenario and the political activities of the Congress and to make them join the cause of the nation Moorthy asserts before the Kanthapurians, "We shall start a Congress group in Kanthapura, and the Congress group of Kanthapura will join the Congress of All India" (Ibid.80). The villagers being convinced of the same spontaneously agreed to do so. In keeping with the spirit of the Congress led activities the villagers are seen observing fasting and showing their solidarity with Gandhi when he initiated his Dandi March. The

whole village started its own independence movement and set up volunteer group which brought people together; ambulance corps took care of the wounded satyagrahis.

There was strong resistance seen towards the British government in the protests of the people in the form of dharnas, picketing and satyagrahas. The voice of the people echoed 'Gandhi ji Ki Jai' and echoed 'Inquilab Zindabad' in order to show their solidarity and boost up the spirit of common people in the fight against the British. The villagers of Kanthapura in keeping with the spirit of the Congress responded wholeheartedly to the movements of the 1930s by way of launching Satyagraha, observing non-cooperation by not paying taxes and showing disloyalty to the Government, endorsing the formation of the Congress Committee in the far-flung villages and their constructive programmes, Jawaharlal Nehru's social programmes, the decision of Gandhi to attend the Second Round Table Conference and above all, Gandhi's all pervading influence on the nation which runs through the entire story.

People observed satyagrahas outside the toddy plantations followed by picketing outside the Skeffington Coffee Estate and the no tax campaign. Many satyagrahis like Moorthy, Rangamma and Ratna were jailed but it did not deter the patriotic feelings for the nation in the minds of the Kantjaputians. They took Gandhi for an incarnation of Shiva who is supposed to free Bharata from the foreign yoke. When Gandhi goes to attend the Round Table Conference, the villagers believe that he would kill Ravana (foreign rule) and bring Sita (Bharata) with him.

Conclusion: Raja Rao, like other writers of his time portrays the situation of India in his famous novel Kanthapura during the tumultuous period from 1919 to 1931. All the events described in the novel are representations of what was happening all around India during those years and how the slumbered souls of the segregated Indian society hugged socio-political awakening in the process of showing their integrity with Gandhi while fighting against the British government. Having comprehended the grip of religion over the contemporary society, the novel describes how arrangements of bhajans, harikathas and other religious activities boosted the souls of common masses to give up social ills, stand in unison and become politically awakened to free themselves from all kinds of ills and subjugation.

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