

Indian Spiritual Civilisation: Gandhiji and his influence in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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Abstract

India and Hinduism always been practicing on the concept of Spirituality. The holy books of Hinduism 'Mahabharata', 'Ramayana' and ' Bhagwad Geeta' describe and preach ways of life especially in terms of spiritual upliftment of soul. Indian literature and writers has been influenced by above mentioned. For example, Raja Rao's '*kanthapura*'

Raja Rao describes complex spiritual and philosophical ideas. It's a story of quest of Ram the protagonist of the novel. Ram had everything in his life and yet he was in search because somewhere he might cherish spirituality as a value of life.

Keywords: Hinduism, Spirituality, Quest, Upliftment

The 19th century American writers Emerson and Thoreau were deeply influenced by the oriental thought. This influence has not been a one-way affair. Thoreau's ideas about civil disobedience and his advocacy of simple life in *Walden* greatly influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Thoreau had read near about forty oriental books especially the *Manu*, the *Vedas*, the *Upanishad*, and the *Bhagvad Gita*. His first work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854), were extremely influenced by Indian scriptures. Naturally, there have been many studies dealing with the Indian influence on the works of Emerson and Thoreau. It is interesting to know that the entire East fascinated these two writers.

In case of Gandhi who has his roots in Indian tradition and a conviction in its civilisation states in *Hind Swaraj* that 'Indian civilisation is unquestionably the best' (85), and earlier he states to speak of his faith to an extreme that, 'It has nothing to learn from anybody else'(82). Accordingly while defining civilization in the simplest possible words he said:

Civilisation is the mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. ... So doing, we know our selves. The Gujarati equivalent for civilisation means “good conduct”. (82)

He was of the opinion that the tendency of modern/ ‘...western civilisation is to propagate immorality.’(85) Mahatma Gandhi personally had high regards for the village life which in his times was not yet affected by the modern civilisation. His faith that India is in the true sense a religious a nation as his contemporaries as Vivekanand and Aurobindo also pronounced. Gandhi influenced his times in all wakes of life. Be it political, social, historical, cultural or literary. His return from South Africa in 1915 marks the beginning of ‘Gandhian era’ in all disciplines. In case of literature too it has been assessed as ‘the Gandhian Whilwind’ by Naik to deal with the phase 1920-1947.

All major Indian writers reflect the Gandhian ideals and ideas in their works. In case of Indian English Literature the ‘trio’ Narayan, Mulraj and Raja Rao who marked their names as giants during the times to reflected the spirit to have the figure of Gandhi at the backdrop of their fiction.

At first, I had chosen Raja Rao’s *Serpent and the Rope* but it being highly philosophical a text, it’s more of diology to discuss Advait against world philosophy. The action is not so central and thus turning to *Kanthapura* which is regarded as a work based on Karma-yog just as *Serpent and the Rope* is all about Gyan-yog and *Cat and Shakespeare* based on Bhakti- yog. There are only two visits to India and that only limited span is to look at. So, the area wouldn’t be such large. And theme of *Serpent and the Rope* is different than this. When we talk about village and simplicity through few characters of ‘*Serpent and the Rope*’ came under this but it was not majorly discussed so it might not give proper insight and would be abrupt idea.

Now, turning back to *Kanthapura*, Rao’s first novel where Gandhiji does not figure as a character but is omnipresent through the villages who are possessed by his thoughts. *Kanthapura* opens with very beautiful and contented village. As Gandhiji says in Hindswaraj(2nd edition Gujarati, preface),

“India can be free this very moment if we turn our back on this modern civilization and go back to our ancient way of life which embodied the right ethical principles. The key to an understanding of Hind Swaraj lies in the idea that worldly pursuits should give way to ethical livings.” (10)

Moorthy- protagonist of *Kanthapura* was a Gandhian and returned to *Kanthapura*, abandoning his studies in the city as an ardent follower of Gandhi, to be known as ‘little Gandhi’ amongst the villagers during Indian freedom struggle. Through Moorthy’s character we can find that ideological thread, mainly *satya* and *ahinsa*, was spread and put to practice. Gandhiji states in one of his letters to Nehru (October 5, 1945)

“I am convinced that if India is to attain true freedom and through India the world also, then sooner or later the fact must be recognised that people will have to live in village, not in towns. In huts, not in palaces. man should rest content with what are his real needs and become self- sufficient.”(150)

In the opening description of *Kanthapura*, we can see that it was a village, brought up in Mother Nature’s lap. Filled with natural surroundings, people and life was surrounded and woven with the nature. Thoreau and Gandhiji were anti modernisation. They believed that the word is better in its’ natural way. They were anarchist and believed in going back to nature. Ideal village and life was same as above mentioned.

In *Walden* Thoreau does the same, he gradually minimalizes things and necessity. He went back to natural- ancient way of living life. Here also Gandhiji believed

The same as Rao depicts. The concepts of Khadi, Charkha and etcetera are the same.

Indian Narrative Mode. Novel is western form, adopted and experimented by writers. Otherwise, before novel form emerged in India, the original tradition to narrate everything was oral. Our great epics *The Mahabharata*, *The Ramayana* were oral first. Indian tradition is inbuilt narration. And here and there in *Kanthapura* also we are taken back to the same tradition. Rao Indianaisethe western form. He depicts Harikatha, Satyanarayanpooja, Lagna git, Bhajan and many more to add a touch of traditional Indian way of life. There are stories even in plot. Harikatha and incarnational lore, songs of river, Story of Satyanarayan’s pooja..These are the stories amongst the story.

The characters in *Kanthapura* are all rustic and god-fearing; they have their primal wisdom and are steadfast to what they believe to be spiritually guided. Gandhi is regarded as or is an avatar, Rama or ‘mahatma’ the great soul and the political situation is also grasped by the folk through Harikatha allegorically where the whites are Ravan and India is Sita. Gandhi too in his national freedom movement used fast, self-sacrifice, bhajans, prayers, rituals to rise and mobilise the people against the British rule. The narrator to the last pariah in the village and the coffee estate are ready to suffer for the freedom of the nation without a historic understanding of the events at national or global level. Thus the solutions are sought at local level by soul force of the local folk to shake the all-powerful brutal empire. The rationalising doesn’t have space here in *Kanthapura* or in other words a life that is lived with reverence to nature and human aspects. The central character Moorthy too has to be discarded to oblivion when he loses faith in the Gandhi’s non-violence and soul force. The end of the novel might seem too tragic to bear the devastation of *Kanthapura* that ‘There is no man nor mosquito’, displacement of people and torn down houses and fields taken over, but it’s the people who stand high and sense of pride that they were steadfast for a larger goal. This aspect that India is a spiritual/cultural entity rather than a geographical a space is aptly put forward by Naik as:

Kanthapura is thus a brilliant attempt to probe to probe the depths to which the nationalist urge penetrated, showing how, even in the remote villages, the new upsurge fused completely with traditional religious faith, thus rediscovering the Indian Soul.(167)

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