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RELEVANCE OF RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA IN 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is one of the best known Indian novels in English and regarded a contemporary Indian classic. Published in 1938, it presents a phase of Indian history through the story of a South Indian Village in the nineteen thirties with a unique force of evocative and interesting details. The novel has made such a strong impact on Indian psyche. The present paper seeks to analyze how *Kanthapura* is relevant for study in 21st century India.

Keywords: Century, Evocative, Indian, Relevant, Psyche

Introduction: Raja Rao belongs to the great trinity of Indian English fiction along with R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. With his metaphysical and philosophical bent of bent of creative mind, he has shaped Indian English fiction and provided it a distinct identity. Raja Rao's first novel *Kanthapura*, published in 1938 during freedom movement, is a major landmark in Indian fiction. It is a story of how Gandhiji's ideas make a place in the hearts of people of small south Indian village and inspire the villagers to unite against the British rule. The novel celebrates the victory of human spirit and attempts to broaden the readers' vision and thought process. Although set against the background of colonized India, it is very much relevant in 21st century globalised India. The evils shown in *Kanthapura* village still exist in contemporary Indian villages. The present paper seeks to analyze how *Kanthapura* is relevant for 21st century India.

The action of the novel takes place in *Kanthapura*, an imaginary small village in South India. The novel revolves around the character of Moorthy who follows the ideals of Gandhiji and takes part in freedom struggle by mobilizing the village people to launch Satyagraha against the British colonial rule. The narrator Achakka, a grandmother of the village, recounts the events, several years after the important events of the story have taken place. The narration reminds us of the great oral tradition of Indian culture in which knowledge is transmitted to generations through wisdom words of grandparents.

Caste system has been integral part of India since ages. Rao portrays this caste system realistically. *Kanthapura* village also maintains the caste hierarchy like any other Indian village. It is divided along the caste lines. The upper caste people of the village like to keep safe distance from the lower caste people like the Sudra and the Pariahs. The location of the houses in the village also reflects caste based division. There is the Brahmin quarter, the Pariah quarter, the Potters' quarter, the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter. Following the ideals of Gandhiji, Moorthy spreads ideas against inhuman practice of untouchability but faces resistance. Though Mahatma Gandhi is not shown as a character in the novel but his ideas and teachings are reflected in the thoughts and actions of several characters in the novel. Besides Moorthy, Advocate Sankar is also a staunch follower of Gandhiji.

So Moorthy goes from house to house, and from younger brother to elder brother, and from elder brother to the grandfather himself, and what do you think?-he even goes to the Potter's quarter and the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter, and I closed my ears when I heard he went to the Pariah quarter. We said to ourselves, he is one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan 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 to take husbands and a brahmin might marry a pariah and a pariah a brahmin. Well,well let them say it, how does it affect us? We shall be dead before the world is polluted. We shall have closed our eyes. (*Kanthapura* 9-10)

But his progressive ideas face initial resistance from the villagers especially upper caste people. It shows deep roots of caste system in Indian psyche. More over this caste system claims to get sanction from religion which results into its strength and continuity. Moorthy's mother dies in depression and fear after Venkama tells her, "... I will tell you what he is doing: he is mixing with pariahs like a veritable Mohammedan, and Swami has sent word through Bhatta to say the whole of *Kanthapura* will be excommunicated. Do you hear that?"(*Kanthapura* 39)

But Moorthy continues to spread awareness and education among the lower caste people. He instills self confidence among them and inspires them to fight against British rule and social evils. The suppressed voices of the marginalized sections of society have been accommodated in the novel. Women characters are assigned lead roles and dalits also perform proactive roles both in the political awakening of people and in the social regeneration of India. Pariah Rachanna and Sampanna take the lead in this mission of social and political transformation. It is fact that after independence, caste system in traditional form has weakened. Social interaction among upper caste and lower castes has increased. But it is also a reality that caste is reemerging with strength in new forms. Still caste plays an important role in village social structure. Caste based violence is on increase. India's dream of super power nation can't be achieved if the nation remains divided on caste lines. Efforts of Moorthy are still required in Indian villages to tackle the evils of caste system.

The novel deconstructs various gender stereotypes. It shows if women are given proper opportunity, they are capable to perform every responsibility. In Indian society, women have been considered weaker sex since ages and confined in domestic sphere with justification that they are best suited to domestic work only. Gandhiji was aware that freedom struggle could not be a mass movement unless women participated in it. He calls for gender equality. The narrator mentions the heroic deeds of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Kamala Devi, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and heroic and unnamed Rajput women who fought for the mother. The novel shows women characters in lead roles. They step out of homes and play an active role in public domain. In the absence of Moorthy, both Ratna and Rangamma mobilize the people for fighting against British rule and strengthen Indian freedom movement. They start learning new things. Rangamma begins to read the stories from the Veda, and Purana to the villagers. Rangamma gains new strength and confidence after her exposure to city life during the trial of Moorthy. She successfully steps into the shoes of Ramakrishna after his sudden death and starts lectures on Vedas and philosophical texts to villagers. She starts teaching yoga and meditation to village women and inspires them to have virtues of patience, preserverence and non-violence. She inspires, "Well, we shall fight the police for Kenchamma's sake, and if rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and supple as a silken thread, and you will hymn out the name of the Mahatma(Kanthapura 91)." It is a feminist text which subverts the stereotypical gender roles often glorified in the mainstream literature.

The novel's message of women empowerment is still relevant in present era. There is no doubt that status of women has improved after independence but a lot is to be achieved yet in women empowerment. Still women are struggling to get their due place in patriarchal society. Crimes against women are on rise. Their visibility in workforce has increased but they are still not occupying significant powerful and decision making positions. A lesson about women's ability to lead effectively can be learnt from *Kanthapura*. A nation cannot progress without gender equality and women empowerment.

The novel also provides a detailed account of the poverty, exploitation and helplessness of the workers and the coolies at the Skeffington Coffee Estate. Workers are forced to sell their labours in lieu of small wages. Through Coffee Estate, the novelist shows how forces of colonialism and capitalism did inhuman and brutal treatment to workers for their vested interests. The condition of female workers is even worse than male counterparts. They are under paid and are victims of sexual exploitation also. The cruelty of capitalism is described when narrator describes behaviour of Estate's owner:

...and if he doesn't send her, a week's salary is cut, and if he doesn't send her then, still more money is cut, and if he still doesn't send her, he'll get a whipping, and the maistri will entice the wench with this or that and bring her to the master.(Kanthapura 48)

Besides this, the coolies have to face dreadful disease like malaria, typhoid in the rainy season which results into many untimely deaths.

Moorthy decides to educate these workers and encourages them to get them out of the web of false consciousness created by the dominant class. He makes them aware about the injustice and oppression they are subjected to. In the era of globalization, unorganized sector employs the largest workforce in Indian economy. Even after government initiatives, the condition of workers in has not improved as per the expectations. Still a large section of workforce is exploited and underpaid. Immigrant labors have to face various hardships. Exploitation of child and women labor still exists in India. The exploitation of workers is due to ignorance about their rights. Making them conscious of their rights is need of the hour so that they can fight against the injustice being done to them.

The character of Bhatta represents cunning money lender in Indian villages. He knows all the ways and means to earn easy money and to add more land to his property. His main business is money -lending. He would lend

money to the poor and needy, but the more pressing the need, the higher would be the rate of interest. His lending rate of interest is decided by need of the borrower. He exploits the poor financial condition of his clients for his vested interests.

Bhatta now owned thirty-seven acres of wet land and ninety acres of dry land in all the villages – in Kanthapura, and Santur and Puttur and Honnali. And there was not a pariah or a brahmin that did not owe him something. But nobody would say anything against him. He was so smiling and so good. (Kanthapura 26)

The informal financial sector still exists in India. Many people are still financially excluded. Many villages don't have banking facilities. Rural poor people have to depend upon village money-lender like Bhatta. Unfortunately, many fail to get out of the debt trap. The trend of suicide due to debt trap is increasing in society. Government needs to take more intensive efforts towards financial inclusion.

The novel talks about social reforms also. Along with independence movement, Gandhiji wanted to launch social reform movement also. He was against various social evils like intoxication etc. In the novel a movement is launched against use of toddy. The villagers sing motivational songs to spread awareness and to inspire people to give up drinking.

The toddy tree is a crooked tree,
And the toddy milk a scorpion milk,
And who is it that uses the scorpion milk, sister? (Kanthapura 147)

In recent time, drug abuse has become a serious threat to Indian youth. All sections of society need to make collaborative and intense efforts to curb the challenge of drug abuse; otherwise this 'Youngistan' may face demographic disaster.

Bureaucracy was the steel framework of British rule. The British government used bureaucracy for its vested interests not for welfare of Indians. Police was an important and strong arm of British government. It was used as a powerful weapon to suppress the freedom movement. In the novel, inhuman face of police administration is exposed when it tries to crush the spirit of non-violent Satyagrahis. The police adopt brutal measures to suppress the movement. The novelist describes the cruelty of police with poignancy:

...and there is such a confusion that men grip men and men crush men and men bite men and men tear men, and moans on moans rise and groans on groans die out, while the ambulance men are still at work and men are bandaged, and shots after shots ring out and man after man falls like an empty sack, and women take up the lamentations: 'he's gone—he's gone—he's gone sister!'...More wounded are brought up, on shoulders and arms and stretchers are they brought up, naked, half-covered, earth covered are they brought up, with dangling legs, dangling hands and bleeding hands, and with bleeding mouths and bleeding foreheads...(Kanthapura 150-51)

After Independence, India adopted, by and large, same bureaucratic structure. It cannot be denied that Indian bureaucracy has played a significant role in nation building and progress, but it also faces allegations of colonial hangover and inhuman approach. The images and reports of police's brutality in democratic nation like India reminds us of brutalities depicted in Kanthapura. Bureaucratic reforms, especially police reforms, are need of hour.

British colonial rule was mainly based on economic interests. Indian economy was turned into a typical colonized one—supplier of raw material and market for British manufactured goods. Gandhiji was aware of this fact which led him to ask Indians to boycott foreign goods and adopt 'swadeshi' one. Charkha became symbol of economic independence. In the novel also, Moorthy asks villagers to use charkha and makes them aware about the evil economic designs of British rule.

Because 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 hand 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 17)

In present times, rural unemployment is a serious challenge as agriculture sector has become stagnant. The agriculture sector is overburdened and facing disguised unemployment. There is need to develop small and medium scale industries in rural India so that rural youth can be made participant in the success story of India. Gandhi's idea of rural economic independence is still relevant.

Religion is an important social institution in Indian social structure. It is an emotional and sensitive issue for an average Indian. As an institution, it carries both functional and dysfunctional dimensions. It can act as a

unifying, progressive force as well as divisive, destructive force. In the novel, religious myths have been used to invoke feelings of patriotism among the Kanthapura people to unite against the British rule. Religions proved as powerful weapon in the hands of freedom fighters during freedom movement. However, the destructive face of religion was seen during bloody partition. For present India also, the novel provides a message that religion should be used as a unifying force not as divisive one. The novel also highlights the issue of religion based discrimination. Kanthapura is a Hindu dominated village. When Bade Khan, a Muslim police officer, arrives in the village on official duty, he is denied residence due to his religion. He, “did not stay in Kanthapura. Being a Mohomedan he could stay neither in the Potters’ Street nor in the Sudra Street, and you don’t of course expect him to live in the Brahmin Street” (Kanthapura 14). Such type of discrimination still persists in our society.

English language as medium of instruction in Education was introduced in India by Macaulay to strengthen the British rule in India. But the same language later became an important tool in the hands of educated Indians to raise voice against colonial rule. It helped in growth of nationalism in India. This alien language has now been infused with spirit of Indianness due to efforts of writers like Raja Rao. Presently Indian English has emerged as a distinct identity. Raja Rao has rightly written in the foreword of the novel:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish and the American. Time alone will justify it. (Kanthapura v)

To conclude, it can be stated that *Kanthapura* is relevant for study in 21st century India. It takes us to the past to learn about ideals, values and struggle of Indian independence movement against the colonial rule. Though India got political freedom in 1947, many challenges and social evils depicted in the novel are still prevalent in modern India. Gandhi’s ‘*Swaraj*’ is yet to be achieved in its true sense. The novel exhorts us to follow the ideals of freedom fighters like Gandhiji and apply these ideals and values to face the challenges present in the contemporary Indian society.

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