



Reflections of gandhian ideologies; Nationalism, spirituality and unity in british colonial India: A study of *kanthapura*, novel by Raja Rao

Sandip C Kurkute

Assistant Professor, Department of English, KANMS College Satana, Nashik, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the typical human psyche that is the sense of realization of slavery and how it instigates human being to prepare a ground to revolt against the established tyranny giving exposure to nationalism, spirituality and unity as presented by the novelist. The novel 'Kanthapura' was written and published during colonial period. 'Colonialism means the maintenance of political, social, economic and cultural domination over the people by the foreign power'. The genre novel in the cotemporary period in general and *Kanthapura* in particular plays a pivotal role in inculcating the trinity *viz.* nationalism, spirituality and unity among the Indian masses. Raja Rao, through the medium of Moorthy, shows extraordinary zeal in uniting the people by propagating the tenets of Gandhiji's truth, honesty, spirituality, non-violence, spinning of yarn and commitment to the nation. It is well said that 'Silence of good people is more dangerous than the violence of bad people'. Hence, it was pertinent that British could rule till India wished. The novelist deliberately depicted a small village *Kanthapura* to point out how the period of 1930 was preparing the ground for the Indian National Freedom Movement which had reached out to the commonest of the common.

Keywords: nationalism, spirituality, unity, freedom, ideology, truth and non-violence

Introduction

The novelist, Raja Rao through both the major and minor characters in the novel has reflected nationalism, unity and spirituality of the people of India in British colonial India. The novel shows the high moral and commitment of the leading persona who get them involved for the cause of the betterment of the vulnerable people of *Kanthapura* who had to pay high taxes to the Government unnecessarily. The nationalistic zeal of the *Kanthapurian* against all oppression by British colonialism is clearly seen in the revolt against the British Imperialism. The rustics depicted in the novel are spiritual in temperament which has been shown by the novelist through many events. Besides, the novelist also shows how the people get united when it comes to the issues of their own existence thereby leading them to think deeply about the various movements started by Gandhiji. They, wholeheartedly, seem to be clinging to the principles of Gandhiji at the call of Moorthy, a leading figure in the novel.

Nationalism

Nationalism is an idea or a movement that promotes the common interests of the particular nation especially with common aims to gain sovereignty, cherish the glorious heritage, maintain, and retain them with the utmost priority. Nationalism holds that each nation should govern itself free from outside interference. India is such a nation where the people live in peace and harmony in spite of her cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. The very fact cannot be denied that the people of India in pre-colonialism period seemed to be less aware of their duties and responsibilities towards the nation. Besides being so, internal conflicts in India paved the way for British to enter and expand their horizons all over.

In the present novel, the novelist threw light on the spirit of nationalism by introducing many events of people coming together and fighting for the common cause. The novel is set in a small village named *Kanthapura* of south Kerala. The protagonist, Moorthy, inspired immensely by Gandhiji, leaves his education and starts taking initiatives in Gandhian ideologies displaying his vibrant leadership and the true spirit of nationalism. He assembles the people, propagates the ideas among the common masses and promotes them to arrange various activities such as *Harikathas* and various festivals resulting from his leadership qualities. It is well said that 'A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way'. The line is strictly applicable to him. One of the aspects of his leadership quality is seen by his conversation with the police *Sahib* of *Skeffington Coffee Estate* where he tries to defend one of the villagers. The policeman says,

"Stitch up your mouth. Do you hear? 'I am a free man, Police Sahib' 'I can speak,' says Moorthy. 'Free man you may be in your palace.' 'But this is the *Skeffington Coffee Estate*.' 'And these are *Skeffington Coffee Estate coolies*.' 'You'd better take care of your legs'. 'I have orders.' 'Coolies are men, Police Sahib. 'And according to the laws of your Government and that of Mr *Skeffington* no man can own another.' 'I have every right to go in.' 'They have every right to speak to me" (P-62)

Thus, Moorthy follows every ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi. After the violence takes place at *Skeffington*, he makes his mind to go on fast and meditate in order to regret. Once while being in meditative status he says "I shall love even my enemies, Mahatma says we should love even our enemies" (P-66) He persistently proclaimed non-violence

and preached the masses significance of 'Don't-touch-the-Government-campaign during their peaceful fight against the tyrants.

A few aspects of Gandhiji's non-violence, spirituality and modesty are seen in his autobiography 'My Experiment with the Truth' while narrating an incident taken place at Halbourn Restaurant in London Gandhiju says that his friend persuaded him a lot to turn toward non-vegetarian food taking Gandhiji at such a restaurant. When the waiter served them with a soup, Gandhiji summoned the waiter. His friend comprehended the embarrassment and asked what the matter was. Gandhiji replied with a great hesitation that he simply wanted to know whether the soup was made of vegetables. To see all this his friend exclaimed- 'You are too clumsy for decent society,' 'If you cannot behave yourself, you had better go.' After creating such a scene there, Gandhiji walked away with the hope of figuring out another restaurant. Since he could not find a single one, he had to remain empty stomach that night. Here, one vividly witnesses the modesty, spirituality and especially in the true sense non-violence by strictly adhering to vegetarianism.

He also takes initiatives to form Congress Committee in Kanthapura and makes it join to Congress of all India. He urges the folk joining to this adventure to vow to always speak truth spin the yarn on *Charakha* and wear no clothes but the *Khadi* clothes. Moorthy has been successful in convincing the people how the British has exploited them, seized their cultural identity and treated them worse than beast by imposing high taxes on various items which, in true sense, belong to them. Thus, he could be able to lit the flame of nationalism in them keep it ablaze.

Advocate Sankar is to be seen as another true follower of Gandhian ideologies. He is often made fun of by the people. The people say "Look, there goes the Ascetic Advocate" (P-101) some calls him as 'Walking advocate.' Notwithstanding, he is so inclined to his duty strictly following the principles of Gandhiji that before taking any case, he firmly asks his client "Swear before me that you are not criminal!" (P-101) and the client says this and that but Sankar always comes back to the point and says "You know if you do not tell me the whole truth, well, I may be forced to withdraw in the middle of the case." (P-101) And indeed he withdrew. This is how he strictly acted in his profession.

The Skeffington Coffee Estate depicted by the novelist is the symbol of British colony and the coolies working there miserably suffering unbearable hardships at the hand of so called Sahib are the symbol of colonized. The coolies think that it's their lot to suffer that way. In such scenario, it was Moorthy who brought those coolies in contact with the Kanthapurians instigating them to stage Satyagraha against the British making the event shape into a small movement, one of the best tools proclaimed by Gandhiji to fight.

Towards the end of the novel, there is awakening among the coolies. The event referred to henceforth as to how the oppressed revolted against the oppressions. Inspired greatly by the deeds and preaching of Moorthy, the coolies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate threw down the barricades and loudly shouted out, '*Vande Mataram*' and '*Mahatma Gandhi ki jay!*'. The city coolie looked at them and at once stopped working. The lights were all put out. The Skeffington coolies continued to march towards them shouting slogans. They were ordered by a white officer on horseback to stop. On their refusal to do so, shots after shots were fired and cries, groans and lamentations resounded in the air. They

ran forward and the police could stop them no more, they jumped over field-bounds and tumbled against gaslights and fell over rocks and sheaf's, sickles and scythes. Three thousand men in all and from the top of the Mound soldiers opened fire which they bore bravely.

Aforementioned incident clearly shows that when the person gets realised about his own self of being in slavery, he starts revolting. This is what happens in the novel. The people merely needs proper leadership which is availed by Moorthy, a typical leader of the then Congress of Kanthapura. He successfully instils nationalistic zeal and Gandhian ideologies in the people of Kanthapura through his own deeds and asceticism. When it comes to confront the Policemen or Bade Khan who is too much loyal to the foreigner standing as the symbol of tyranny, Moorthy says "Brothers, in the name of the Mahatma, let there be peace, love and order. As long as there is God in Heaven and purity in our hearts evils cannot touch us. We hide nothing. We hurt none. And if these gentlemen want to arrest us, let them. Give yourself up to them. That is the true spirit of *Satyagrahi*." (P- 88) So, when the policeman slaps Moorthy and arrests him, there is a cry from the crowd "*Mahatma Gandhi ki jay!*" (P- 88) Here, the novelist makes the readers acquainted with the nationalistic, spiritual, non-violent and aesthetic aspects of Moorthy's personality.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the quality of being more concerned with the spirit of human being and his soul rather than materialistic things. In the sense, spirituality is taken to be an opposite of materialism. The materialistic tendency and mentality has merely concerns with individual profits and is consistently looking for all physical comforts, glamour, and all sorts of pleasures in life at the cost of honesty, righteousness and integrity.

The protagonist, Moorthy was an educated young man in Kanthapura. He could have lived his life comfortably. But he devoted his entire life to the movements started by newly found Congress Committee. Moorthy recited *Gayathri* thrice a thousand and eight times. Once, he was seated by the river, while his mother was washing the clothes, and the soft leap of the waters over smooth boulders so lulled him to quite, he closed his eyes, and his closed eyes led him to say his prayers, and he remembered the child *Pahlada* who had said Hari was everywhere and he said to himself, "I shall see Hari too" (P- 67) Whenever he prayed, he was completely engrossed in it detaching himself from this physical world.

The illiterate but innocent people in Kanthapura are more spiritual and religious in sentiment not having a small amount of allurements is clearly seen through their temperament. The novelist perhaps intended to mirror how the rustics are more honest, devoted and beneficial to one's country. They have no wants and physical desires and never crave for any comforts and materialistic things and hence live satisfied lives. Whereas, the people who consider theme to be literate and knowledgeable are more selfish and are consistently found in indulging themselves in unjust practices to acquire money in order to fill their materialistic thirsts. Hence, it may not be inappropriate to say that Scholarship and erudition of the elite people might prove more harmful for the degradation of any nation than the illiteracy and innocence of the rustics. Here the bottom line is that the people of Kanthapura are spiritual, innocent, and selfless and committed towards the nation. All the

Kanthapurians except a few are enthusiastically and energetically willing to join the Congress and render their services unselfishly. When Moorthy appeals "Then come forward and tell me if you can take an oath before the goddess that you will spin at least a hundred yards of yarn per day" and they all cry out "No oath before the goddess! If we don't keep it, who will bear her anger?" (P-77) It substantially shows how innocent and faithful they were! They were fully committed to work but could not swear Goddess. The innocent beliefs and faiths in the goddess Kenchamma would not allow their conscience to do any wrong. Here, the novelist highlights their innocence commitment to work for the nation. He also reflects relevant spiritual aspects of the Kanthapurians.

The novel Kanthapura is full of Indian life, characters, manners, religious sentiments, and customs which together make it an epic of Indian freedom struggle mirroring nationalism and spirituality of Indian masses. The villagers believed in myths. A typical myth of the Goddess Kenchamma killing all the demons that troubled people stands as a symbol of divinity and spirituality had passed generation after generation in the village. Their high regards, faiths and beliefs in the goddess never allowed their conscience to do any wrong with the fears that the goddess will curse. These spiritual and religious aspects of them kept them far away from the materialistic world. In view of this fact, the contribution of the commonest of the common in the freedom struggle of India cannot be ignored.

The people in the village celebrate various festivals such as Dusshera, Kartik Poornima, Ganesh Jayanti etc. The people of Kanthapura were innocent and vulnerable. They were authentic followers of traditions and all the rituals prevalent at that time. Their religious and spiritual views pertaining to the set traditions have minutely been mirrored by the novelist by showing them keen interested in listening of Veda, Puranas, myths, legends, Harikathas and relevant things that they believed in. They accepted whatever good they found in those scriptures. Harikathas were the best platform, where all people were made familiar with Shiv, Parvati, and Ram and Sita. This type of tendency of being excessive religious was not negative one, which could become any hindrance in the path they have chosen, for them but it proved to be a motivating force to get united against British tyranny and thereby inculcating the seeds of unity and nationalism in them.

In the words of Einstein- "Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind" As the saying goes, Science without religion is soulless and religion without science is brainless. The people of Kanthapura were both religious and scientific, scientific in the sense that they knew the fact that they would not get liberty in the form of a gift from British, hence they did not remain passive relying upon either goddess Kenchamma or any supernatural power. On the other hand, they vigorously acted against the perpetual oppression of the labourers at the hand of British people working at Skeffington Coffee House. Thus, besides being religious, faithful and spiritual, all strata of society i.e. Viewers, Potters, Pariah, Brahmins were all scientific in their outlook.

Unity

Unity stands for wholeness or integrity. It is generally a situation in which the people are in agreement. They say 'United we stand, divided we fall'. During the British

colony and its rule over India, it has been evident that many of the small kings in India extended their support either directly or indirectly to the foreign ruler. There was a lacuna of unity, integrity and nationalism in the people, which resulted into British expanding the horizons of their colonies and ruling the Indian sub-continent for such long period of time. Such treacherous and separatist mentality could not let the people to be united for their own personal gains. It was merely in 1857, when India witnessed historical revolt against British wherein the seeds of unity and commitment towards the nations were sown amongst the Indian masses. Thus, the event of 1857 stood as a testimony of the people's unity irrespective of cast, colour, creed and religion. The Hindu and Muslim as well as all the strata of Indian society right from village slum dwellers to those of urban realised their selves making them all stood united to fight with integration to remove British Empire. The same spirit of unity is vividly seen in the novel through the medium of small village.

Moorthy and advocate Sankar get all sections of people involved irrespective of their social status. Hence, we see Rachanna who happened to be an outcast was seen at the front of the movement along with viewers, potters and the people from Brahmin community who initially seemed to be reluctant to do so. The people, be it Harikathas, celebrations of their conventional festivals, awareness campaigns held by both Moorthy and Ratna or political campaigns in guise of politics, seem to assemble together making them experience the power of unity and understand the usefulness of their self-esteem and their duties and responsibilities towards the nation making them feel pride in nationalism in the true sense of the term.

The novelist reflected unity shown by the Kanthapurians in the time of crisis. When Moorthy is arrested by Bade Khan, a police officer, symbol of British presence in India, it's Ratna who initiates and take over the charge of Moorthy. She is a young woman of progressive views. She plays a prominent role in organizing women volunteer corps and imparts them all the necessary training. Thus, she displays extraordinary courage and resourcefulness at the time of British repression by not making the spirit of unity disintegrated. She is beaten up, dishonoured and put her behind bar but her unflinching desire, determination and spirit of nationalism don't become barriers in her way. When Jayaramcharan, the Harikatha man, is arrested, she continued her task. After Rangamma's death, she reads the Newspapers and other publicity materials to spread the ideologies of Congress and keeps the villagers up to date.

From the inception of Moorthy's unflinching efforts right from forming of Congress Committee to their struggle against the tyranny, the spirit of unity among the people don't seem to be diminishing. It can be vividly seen when the people of Kanthapura including boys and girls and all march towards the Skeffington Coffee Estate. Even though the blows of *lathis* are showered upon them, they march forward and forward with high spirit and energy rather than to retreat. They are holding flags and singing songs. One of the boys swings down from the *pipal* tree and sings-

"Lift the flag high
O, lift the flag high,
Brothers, sisters, friends and mothers,
This is the flag of the Revolution," (P-174)

This is the king of spirit of unity which is vividly seen in the people of Kanthapura when it comes to fight against the foreigners for their self- existence.

Conclusion

Thus, the novelist has successfully shown the spirit of the Kanthapurian enabling the readers get acquainted with the principles of Gandhiji e. i. truth, brotherhood, non-violence, *Satyagrahas*, nationality, spirituality and unity. The people of Kanthapura except a few are much inclined to the betterment of nation than anything else when it comes to the well-being of the nation. The novelist shows how the people are spiritual, feel proud of their nation and come together irrespective of their cast, creed, race, colour, religion and ethnicity for the cause of the nation especially when they realize that their self-esteem and existence in danger.

References

1. Rao Raja, Kanthapura, Oxford Indian Paperback, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Second Edition (Print), 1989.
2. <https://www.mkgandhi.org/autobio/chap15.htm>
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationalism>
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism>