
Religion and Nationalism in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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ABSTRACT

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The present paper is a modest attempt at exploring how the ideas of Religion and Nationalism form the warp and woof of a novel like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* in a back-of-beyond village at a crucial moment in Indian history. That the launching of the National Movement under the leadership of Gandhi through the length and breadth of the country could not have been successful *without* the active participation of millions of anonymous people is a known fact, but *how* it is achieved is the theme of this unique novel which has many firsts to its credit. A one-man movement becomes a mass movement thanks to local heroes like Moorthy "our Gandhi" and a few other prominent men and women of the village. How the national spirit percolates into the psyche of a whole village that represents a microcosmic picture of India on the whole is the novelist's concern here. This gripping tale told by a simple village woman in rustic idiom exemplifies a fine fusion of Religion and Nationalism.

Annie Besant's most perceptive views on the Indian predilection for a strong religious base cited in the seminar hand-out could not have been more pertinent to the theme of the seminar. Nor could one agree more with her despite all the attendant evils that have plagued the nation in recent times in the name of religion. Her incisive analysis of the Indian psyche lends credence to Swami Vivekananda's own splendid assessment of the Hindu ethos in his oft-quoted lines from his Lecture on "My Life and my Mission", notwithstanding the sting in the tail:

The Hindu man drinks religiously, sleeps religiously,
walks religiously, marries religiously and robs religiously.

Small wonder then if that great intellectual luminary Ananda Coomaraswamy should have, with all his cerebration and phenomenal scholarship still asserted in his epoch-making essay "The Theory of Art in Asia":

.... the decline of art has always followed
the decline of faith and religion

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Hence his profound admiration for the 14th century German mystic Eckhart who believed in the perfection of the work which lay in preparing "all creatures to return to God." If it is still true that all that India can offer to the world, whether literature, music or arts, proceeds from her

philosophy, then it would indeed be a tragedy if she were to exchange this *svabhava* or essential Indianness for a “cosmopolitan veneer” or what has loosely come to be bandied about in political circles today as “secularism”, for then India would come “empty-handed” before the world.

In the light of the foregoing remarks it would be worthwhile to see how a creative writer like Raja Rao with deep spiritual concerns and metaphysical preoccupations taps the native sensibility of a people for whom religion is the breath of their nostrils. One cannot think of a more convincing and a more eloquent example than his first novel *Kanthapura* written when he was barely 26 in a medieval castle in far-away France. The novelist tries to tell a story from the “contemporary annals” of his village. However, he himself admits “the telling has not been easy”, for “one has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own.” It is amazing how this maiden venture of a young writer can fit into the framework of this seminar so adequately, for here is a fine synthesis of all three components that constitute the theme on hand – Nationalism, Religion and Literature – a virtual commingling or confluence of the three streams that makes the novel *unique*. Attention to any *one* at the cost of the other (as it so often happens elsewhere) would have, needless to say, detracted from its excellence. But it must be reiterated how the three different strands are inextricably and unobtrusively woven into one another to give a sense of roundedness.

A work of art, it is said, is the product of certain social forces which must be understood for a right understanding and appreciation of the work itself. Matthew Arnold writes in his famous essay, “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time”:

For a literary masterpiece, two powers must concur,
the power of the man, and the power of the moment,
and the man is not enough without the moment.

The Indian National Movement under the leadership of Gandhi exemplifies precisely this Arnoldian ideal of the “man” and the “moment” coming together. But in the Indian context the “social” or “political” by no means eschews the “religious” and hence, it may be seen how the early waves of nationalism in India in the early 19th century *were* religious and Hindu. Vivekananda's nationalism, for instance, notes Nehru, was Hindu and it had its roots in the Hindu religion and culture.

Born in such a milieu and himself cast in an intensely religious mould, it was but natural that Gandhi should have refused to separate politics from religion in his own personal ethic. In fact, he unfailingly strove to spiritualize politics that at times left his western – educated protégé, Jawaharlal Nehru in a quandary. But if the National Movement became a *mass* movement into which the anonymous millions of the country threw in their lot unconditionally and unflinchingly, it was because of Gandhi's efforts to infuse a religious temper. Without this religious base it is indeed doubtful if it would have elicited the kind of response it did. What in a sense was a one-man revolution turned out to be a national revolution thanks to the moral force the Mahatma exerted on the populace of the country. It is precisely this awakening of the national spirit that forms the stuff of Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*.

The village of *Kanthapura* is truly India in microcosm, for it could have been any other village slowly rousing itself from a deep slumber to fight the enemy. But what prevents the novel from being overtly political is the way the novelist skilfully intersperses the political with the religious and the social. In fact, it is in his recourse to the religious element that the ground is

prepared in a masterly way for the launching of the Movement in this back of beyond village – a village that lies in the valleys of the Himavathy, “curled like a child on its mother's lap.” Considerable space is devoted in the early part of the novel to showing how a religious fervour hangs in the air. Thanks to the villagers' implicit faith in Goddess Kenchamma and Her powers to protect them through “famine and disease, death and despair”, the work at once acquires a religious tone and intensity. This presiding deity of Kanthapura brought from Heaven by the penances of sage Tripura to kill a demon that was ravaging the land becomes the focal point and all life in Kanthapura revolves around Her. The humble village is thus invested with a legendary history, a rich *sthalapurana* of its own before it is destined to make a different kind of history in contemporary terms that earns for it a national identity.

The little Kanthapurishwari's temple on the Main Street Promontory becomes the “centre” of life with a series of celebrations beginning with the consecration ceremony of a half-sunk linga followed by *Sankara-Jayanthi*, subsequently leading to Rama, Krishna and Ganesha festivals. That is not all. There are *Harikathas* and *bhajans*, evening prayers, camphor ceremonies, reading of *Sankara-Vijaya* and discussion of Vedanta and *Maya-Vada*. Sastri's grand *Harikatha* on Parvati's winning of Siva makes the god - world seem so “true and near and brilliant.” Indeed, with “poetry on his tongue” Sastri could keep the people sitting for hours together. And “how we regretted the evening *Sankara-jayanthi* was over”, remarks the narrator adding: “The air looked empty.”

But what is even more striking is the way the conventional *Harikatha* mode is exploited for introducing the political theme of Swaraj. It is so adroitly used that one hardly notices the transition in subject. The famous *Harikatha* - man Jayaramachar knows how to carry the people along. Hence his allusion to Siva, the three-eyed to drive home the point that Swaraj too is three – eyed: “Self purification, Hindu-Moslem unity and Khaddar”. Though he talks of Damyanthi and Sakuntala and Yashoda everywhere, there is something about our country and our Swaraj, observes the narrator. His *Harikatha* on the birth of Gandhiji can carry conviction to the people only through the Krishna story. If Krishna fought the demons and killed the serpent Kali, Mohandas too would fight against the enemies of the country, against the “dissipated Red – man” and his government. This splendid enactment of a contemporary theme in a traditional mould may be unforgettable to some, but unpalatable to others who mince no words when they admit, he is a “funny *Harikatha* - man” and “never had we heard *Harikathas* like this”. Resistance to change is not merely faithfully reflected here but the pitfalls of idealization also are ingeniously avoided.

It is interesting to note that if Moorthy, the protagonist becomes a “Gandhi-man” and realizes the “sheathless being of his soul”, it is not through any actual meeting but through a “vision”, a “holy vision” of the “God-beaming” Mahatma affirming in his inimitable way the primacy of Truth and the primacy of a universal God. Indeed, Moorthy's relationship with the Mahatma is like Hanuman to Rama. This episode if anything testifies to the way religion and nationalism coalesce at the hands of a master. The judicious choice of idiom and imagery contributes not a little towards this synthesis. A new, resurgent India is conceived of as a temple.... “a thousand-pillared temple” that has to be built, stone by stone, man by man with each one of them forming a pillar. “India then will live in a temple of our making”, Moorthy is confident. It need hardly be mentioned that if he succeeds in mobilizing the people of the village, it is because he too speaks the language of the Mahatma highlighting Truth and God and Ahimsa and love of the enemy:

.....as long as there is a God in

Heaven and purity in our hearts

Evil cannot touch us. (120)

His method of popularizing Gandhian ideology acquires religious overtones as in:

You know, brothers and sisters, we are here in a temple,

and the temple is temple of the One and we are one

with everything that is in the One. (120)

Little wonder if in the process Moorthy is looked upon as “our Gandhi”, “our Mahatma”, the “saint of our village”, in fact, “a better Gandhist than him cannot be found”. Even when he denounces narrow orthodoxy, it is his religious instincts that carry him through. If he pleads with the people to work hard it is because their crops might grow “God-high”. Such his influence even Patel Range Gowda declares with a finality:

....the Mahatma is a holy man,

and if the Mahatma says what you say,

let the Mahatma's word be the word of God.

(100-01)

And Moorthy has only to clinch the issue in an idiom that matches with Range Gowda's:

....it is no light matter to be a member of the Congress and

..... every promise before the Congress is a promise

before the Mahatma and God,....

(101)

Correspondingly everybody rises to the occasion in one way or another. But what is astounding is the way their religious impulse is able to sustain their faith in a movement of which they had no inkling whatsoever before. Consider how Rangamma can meet the challenge:

..... we shall fight the police for Kenchamma's sake,

and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will

grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread....

(153)

If she can enthuse the other women of Kanthapura to face the police lathis “without moving a hair” it is by talking to them through the only medium they know – the medium of God. Invoking some age-old religious practices like walking the holy fire or smiting the bodies with swords, without coming to any harm, Rangamma can appeal to their sentiments and win them over. So much so they are confident that even if the Mahatma is arrested, the Goddess “will appear before the judges and free him”. And again when Moorthy is taken away they weep and pray and fast in the hope “the gods would hear our feeble voices”, for “who would hear us, if not they?”. This is how religion forms the warp and woof of this novel even though in a sense it is basically about a people's political awakening during the country's colonial period.

However, the novelist is not oblivious of the seamy side of religion that has so often resulted in negation of values if not proved to be anti-life. If there is considerable opposition to Moorthy and his political activities in the village it is largely because of religious conservatism and dogma, perhaps understandable in a rural folk steeped in superstition but all the same unacceptable to progressive minded people. However, the presence of religious orthodoxy serves a dual purpose in the novel – one, to point out how religion or rather its misinterpretation can be self-limiting and the other to let it act as a corrective to idealists themselves in their new – found zest to break free of all shackles. Since criticism comes from within, the reader gets a perspective to view the whole scene with detachment and objectivity. An anonymous old man at a meeting in Gandhi Maidan represents the voice of the conservative when he cries out:

Ah, our religion is going to be desecrated by you youngsters!

(126)

And “desecration” for him means corruption and confusion of castes and “the great traditions our ancestors have bequeathed to us” which will “anger our manes”. Pointing to “disorder, corruption and egoism” before the arrival of the British, he fears that once the British rule disappears “there will be neither Brahmin nor pariah, vaisya and sudra – nay, neither Mohomedan nor Christian, and our eternal dharma will be squashed like a louse in a child's hair.” In fact, he believes the British came “to protect us”, to protect “our bones and our dharma”. And if Queen Victoria became our “beloved sovereign” it was not only because she was “a great Queen, a Mother - Queen” but “the most courageous defender of our faith”.... “And do not the dharma Sastras say the king is the protector of faith?” So “I cry out 'Long live George the Fifth, Emperor!'”

As if this outrageous self-betrayal is not enough, he even professes he is for all “who respect the ancient ways of our race, and not for all this Gandhi – Gindhi who cannot pronounce even a gayathri.” This hostility and disapproval accounts for the several disparaging references to him in the novel packed in atrociously vehement language like: “this Gandhi vagabondage”, “this Gandhi business”, “this Gandhi affair” culminating in “Oh, this Gandhi! Would he were destroyed!” While pouring scorn and anger over “this Gandhi” for “meddling with the dharma shastras, the writ laws of the ancient sages”, they can only hope that the religion of Vasistha and Manu, Sankara and Vidyananya might “go unmuddied to the Self – created one”, not realizing that it is rather their narrow path that is muddied with ignorance. But then it cannot be overlooked how Moorthy himself had a struggle against such impulses during his visit to the pariah quarter. When in the house of Pariah Rachanna, “the roof seems to shake” and “all the gods and all the manes of heaven seem to cry out against him and his hands steal mechanically to the holy thread, and holding it, he feels he would like to say, 'Hari – Om, Hari – Om’”.

In such a context it is not surprising that the work he and the other boys engage themselves in should be contemptuously referred to as “city nonsense” and “pariah business”. The Sevika Sangha also runs into rough weather reflected in the way the volunteers are derisively addressed as “sevis” or their work as “sevi business”. But the triumph, to the extent there is any lies in the fact that the movement gradually spreads even to the Brahmin quarter, where people are willing to say, “we too are Gandhi's men, beat us as much as you like”. The result is, “groans and moans and cries and shouts and coughs and oaths and bangs and kicks” followed by cries of “Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai” fill the air resulting in an atmosphere that is surcharged with emotion. The graphic description of all that hectic activity makes it an actual, palpable *experience* for the reader. But what does all this lead to in the end? Not much one fears,

except cynical, disillusioned statements such as the following:

it was all this Moorthy, this Moorthy
 who had brought all this misery upon us
 (225)

Mad we were..... mad to follow Moorthy.
 When did Kanthapura ever refuse our three
 morsels of rice and water?
 (230-31)

And the stark reality that confronts us in the end:

There was neither man nor mosquito in Kanthapura. (259)

But what offsets this pessimism is the fact that the people of this village – the countless unsung heroes of a great movement put up such a brave fight at all in the first place and made all those touching sacrifices with supreme devotion and conviction so as to subscribe to a cause and save themselves from inner shame that would enable them to say:

there is something that has entered our hearts,
 an abundance like the Himavathy on Gauri's night
 (256)

After all who can dispute that a time of revolution is a test of character, of courage, endurance and selflessness? The people of Kanthapura are a living embodiment of all these virtues.

Lastly, even if the action of the novel is predominantly political, dealing as it does with the spread of nationalist ideas that brought in their wake a revolutionary fervour that eventually led to uprisings, violent clashes, lathi charges, picketing and bonfires, processions and songs, flag-salutations and boycott of foreign cloth, it is basically a work of art, the artist never losing sight of the aesthetic element. His unprecedented use of the English language itself which has created literary history is a major contribution to Indian English Fiction. With many firsts to its credit, this novel, which so successfully infuses the Indian tempo of life into English expression, is bound to endure as a minor classic.

Work Cited

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