



RAJA RAO AS AN ADEPT IN PROJECTING *KANTHAPURA* AS A PROMINENT SOCIAL DOCUMENT: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper projects the prominent social living of the villagers has been spotlighted by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* which can rightly be called a social document where the whole novel bristles with the social problems like untouchability labour exploitation, widowhood, drinking and enervating superstitions misconceived as religion. It also portrays how Gandhiji aimed for a complete transformation of society and how he strongly and forcefully condemned untouchability.

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INTRODUCTION

Gandhiji's dream that no individual in India should suffer from want of food or clothing has remained a sad dream after Independence. He advocated that untouchability had no integral connection with the essence of Hinduism because it was irrational and a denial of Ahimsa. He called the untouchables 'Harijans' meaning 'children of God' and treated them as his own kith and kin. He wanted his wife also to accept this community life. But to her, it was an ordeal. Gandhiji records in his *Experiments with Truth* that there was a quarrel between him and Kasturbai when she declined to clean a chamber-pot for a Christian Clerk of "Panchama" (untouchable) parentage. He insisted that she should not only perform the distasteful task but do it cheerfully or else leave him. When she refused to do it he pushed her out of the house, being blinded with anger. Later, he repented and years later he recorded that he had been "a cruelly kind husband".

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Gandhiji wished that if he were born again, he would be born amidst the untouchables so as to share their difficulties and to work for their liberation. He dedicated his whole life for the upliftment of the downtrodden people. His fast unto death in 1932 against the infamous "Communal Award" which was calculated to sever the body of Hindu community by providing separate electorate to the so-called untouchables is regarded as an example of monumental self-sacrifice. In 1933, he announced the gift of Sabarmathi Ashram to the Harijan Sevak Sangh. He set out on a country side tour to promote the Harijan cause. He advised caste Hindus to purge themselves of prejudices against the Harijans and he urged the Harijans to shake off drugs and drinks which hindered their absorption into Hindu society. He pleaded for the opening of temples to Harijans. He proclaimed, "None can be born untouchables as all are sparks of one and the same fire" (P21). The Mahatma's unremitting, untiring crusade against social inequality and the humiliating conditions to which backward sections and untouchables were exposed is epoch-making. He stood up as a great prophet of human equality. Gandhiji embarked on the epic struggle: the freedom for all Indians with the help of such weapons as Truth and non-violence. Tagore bestowed on

Gandhiji the name “the Mahatma” meaning the Great soul: “To the Mahatma elevation of India’s dignity did not only comprise of political liberty; he was bent on the improvement of rural structure of society. He wished to achieve an end to the absentee landlordism and the inhuman tax levies which burdened the average tenant farmers and above all he fought for the abolition of the stigma of untouchability which cursed the lives of millions” (Nicholson 8). Throughout his life, he worked for the removal of many social evils like untouchability, casteism communalism, dowry system etc. In the words of Prof. Sudhansu Bihral Mookherje;

“Gandhi is so far perhaps the only man in history, who made truth and non-violence not only a part of his own life, but sought to make them a part of the life of humanity at large” (P 43). Non-violence and Satyagraha, Gandhiji staunchly believed, applied in the right way, can cure many of the maladies that afflict humanity all over the world. An egalitarian society based on active, mutual love and harmony was the goal of Gandhiji wanted to simplify life. He loved simplicity but the simplicity was also based on a strict economy. He looked upon waste and extravagance with repugnance. Apart from the evil of foreign rule, two formidable evils which held sway over the Indians were idleness and poverty. Gandhiji prescribed cures for both. The cure for idleness was labour and the cure for poverty was first mobilization of existing resources, secondary equitable distribution and thirdly limiting population growth through moral restraint or Brahmacharya. He believed rather strongly that the key to India’s economic property lay in the regeneration of the village. His ardent wish was to recuperate and regenerate rural India. The Mahatma whose heart bled to see the misery of the Indian villagers and who stood for revival and rejuvenation of the Indian village formulated the ‘constructive programme’ consisting of eighteen items, with khadi as nucleus, for salvation of the country. Khadi is a universal subsidiary on which the semi-starved and under-employed peasants could depend to supplement their income. Gradually the spinning wheel became the centre of rural uplift in the Gandhian scheme of Indian economy.

Gandhiji very exhaustively dealt not only with the economic or political but also with the social problems of Indian society. When Gandhiji come into the scene, Indian social set-up was completely evil-ridden. Social reforms failed to clear the society of its deep-rooted evils. The image of India outside its national borders had been damaged and for a foreigner, India was a land of superstitions. Indian society was blotted with evils of child-marriage, inequality and untouchability. Widow re-marriage was forbidden and female education was prohibited. Poverty further had deteriorated the social conditions. It was in these circumstances that as a Karma Yogi, the Mahatma tried to pin-point these social evils and reform the Indian society. At a crucial moment, he came on the Indian scene and proved to be a saviour to India’s destitute millions. His advent is described by Nehru evocatively in his

The Discovery of India:

“He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths, like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes ... He did not descend from the top, he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition... The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and Truth... always

keeping the welfare of the masses in view ... But the dominant impulse of India, under British rule, was that fear, pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear, fear of the army, the police, the widespread secret service, fear of the official class... fear of the landlord’s agent, fear of the money-lender, fear of unemployment and starvation, which were always on the threshold. It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi’s quiet and determined voice was raised...” (P 299). To Gandhiji, political freedom was not an end but only a means for the emergence of a better type of individual and for a better ordering of society. Through the personal example which he set, he gave an idea of what an ideal human being should be. He gave the same “satyagrahi” to the ideal man.

In his personal life, he did demonstrate who a real Satyagrahi is:

“To do manual work to earn one’s livelihood which he called Bread labour; and to religiously adhere to the principle of ‘Swadeshi’ in every sphere of life – economic, political, social and spiritual – these he regarded as the attributes of a Satyagrahi” (Venkataramangaiya 73).

Gandhiji aimed at a complete transformation of society and his programme of socio-economic reconstructions reflected the latent aspirations of the common man. He was out and out against the various superstitions found among the Indian people. He also strongly and forcefully condemned untouchability. He wrote in *Young India* in 1920;

“Hindus will certainly never deserve freedom, nor get it if they allow their noble religion to be disregarded by the retention of taint of untouchability” (Mukhi 60).

He suggested that social reformers should take steps and allow the untouchables to enter temples and worship there. He was pained to see the Harijans being denounced as untouchables and Shudras. He did condemn the caste system and supported inter-caste marriages. The Mahatma also felt that ban on widow-remarriage was another social evil. According to Gandhiji, drinking was an evil. Drugs and drinks were two arms of a devil. He compared a drunkard to a thief. Purna Swaraj was impossible of attainment, he believed, of Indian society contained people who are slaves of intoxicating drinks. He strongly advocated the cause of prohibition. Gandhiji’s words of non-violence, of inter-caste co-operation and the abolition of untouchability have found adherently among novelists like Venkataramani, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand who all created works of fiction carrying in them the message of the Mahatma. The problems of casteism and untouchability, especially, preached by Gandhiji found strong expression in the works of these writers. Since the theme of *Kanthapura* is socio-political, naturally it has the problems, mostly social. The whole novel bristles with such social problems as untouchability, labour exploitation, widowhood, drinking and enervating superstitions misconceived as religion.

The superstition of the villagers is typical of the society of Kanthapurana. The religion of the people is based on the superstitious beliefs and puja rituals. Kenchamma is their goddess. Though the goddess does not help them in the hour of their crisis and famine, disease, death and despair sweeping across the village, their faith in the goddess is not at all shaken. The simplicity of the villagers is displayed in the words of the narrator:

“She (Kenchamma) killed a demon ages, ages, ago, a demon that had come to ask our young sons as food and our young women as wives. Kenchamma came from the Heavens – it was the sage Tripura who had made penances to bring her down – and she waged 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 all red. If not, tell me, sister, why should it be red only from Tippur stream upwards, for a foot down on the other side of the stream you have mud, black and brown, but never red” (Kanthapura 8). They strongly believe that the goddess never fails them in their grief. When it does not rain, they blame the goddess for making their stomachs burn. Instantly, “Kenchamma, through the darkness of the sanctum, opens her eyes wide and she smiles on you a smile such as you have never before beheld”. Then, “the rain patters on the files, and many a peasant is heard to go into the fields, squelching through the gutter and mire”. Achakka, the narrator assures, “she has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma” (P9). In the words of Somdeva, “This aspect of society which is absolute faith-soaked has been scoffed at by the artist” (P48). When there is small-pox raging in the village, they believe that the goddess will protect them from its fury if they vow to walk the holy fire on the annual fair. When there is cholera, they offer sarees and golden trinkets to the goddess, “... and the goddess never touched those that are to live – as for the old ones, they would have died one way or the other any way”. (Kanthapura 9). The bitter pills given by the Sahib to the coolies of Skeffington Estate, for malaria, are thrown away for the coolies believe that divine faith will make them well. During Vaisakh, when they plough the fields, Priest Rangappa performs puja to the goddess. The villagers stand in awe and fear in front of the sanctum. And Priest Rangappa is heard to ring the bell in the sanctum, and all eyes grow dim and the eyelids droop and everyone says, “There, the goddess is going to show her face’ and they tremble and press against each other and when the legs itch they do not scratch, when the waters drip, they do not shake and then suddenly the curtain is drawn, and mother Kenchamma is there straight, bright and benign and the candlebras weave their lights around her, and they say, ‘maybe she has passed a good night!’.

Then priest Rangappa lights the camphor and lifts it up to her jeweled face and takes it round her diamond hands and ruby feet and they all say, “There, she has sent us her blessings. Oh, Kenchamma gives us a fine harvest and no sickness, Kenchamma, Kenchamma, goddess’ and even the bulls stand without waving their tails”(P160)*Kanthapura* is thus, a social criticism and it is a plea for the regeneration of these illiterate and ignorant villagers. Widowhood was a burning problem of those days and Raja Rao finds it worth tackling in his novel. From an analysis of this novel, one comes to know how the villagers were badly disposed towards the widows. A widow in a backward village should not dress well. She should not put up her hair but should shave head. She should neither eat well nor lead a happy life. The Gandhians who propagate that one should not marry early, one should allow widows to remarry and that a Brahmin are thought to be polluting society. A widow is supposed to keep herself confined in the dark isolation of the house. Though a young widow may be innocent, she is suspected of clandestine amours if she is seen talking to a man. A widow ought to live in a lowly manner unless there is something wrong about it. The words of waterfall Venkamma “who roared day and night against Rangamma” (P11) is good evidence of this fact.

“Why should a widow, a childless widow too, have a big house like that? And it is not her father that built it. I have two sons and five daughters, and that shaven widow hadn’t even the luck of having a bandicoot to call her own. And you here only to look at her gold belt and her dharmawar sari. Whore?” (Kanthapura 11). The abusive nature of the village women towards widows can be known from the following passage in the novel: “... and when Kamamma (Ratna’s widowed mother) was gone, they would split behind her and make this face, and that and throwing a handful of dust in her direction pray for the destruction of the house” (P 49). When Ratna, the young widow, refuses to be subdued by the villagers, it arouses the anger of the people. Ratna is a symbolic figure representing a defiant Hindu widow. She revolts against the age-old traditional prejudice against the widows. In the revolt and defiance of Ratna, one can discover the positive view of Raja Rao. He wants widows to live a life of natural freedom. They should be allowed to remarry and his feeling is that widows should not be cursed by society under any circumstances. Ratna, who is at first cursed by the village women, later during the freedom struggle is looked upon as their leader. She is raised to a state of dignity and all the women act acting to her will. Som Deva writes:

“Her case passes a social problem and Ratna is the sponsor of a new idea which should liberate the Hindu widows from the shackles of wrong social obligations” (P 74). One most important problem in the novel is that of untouchability and one is dealt at length in *Kanthapura*. The village quarter is divided into two different sects of quarters: the Brahmin quarter and the Pariah quarter. Based on this caste-division, their outlook on life, too, differs. The Brahmins and Sudras do not see eye to eye in the each other. Achakka, the Brahmin narrator, though quite broad-minded possess the caste-superiority. When she describes the settings of the village, she says she does not know how many huts there are in the Pariah quarters. She guesses there may have been ninety or a hundred huts there. She immediately excuses himself, remarking assertively, “Of course, you wouldn’t expect me to go to the Pariah quarter, but I have seen from the street corner Beadle Timmayya’s hut” (P 13). When she hears that Moorthy had visited the Pariah quarter, she closes her ears and wishes herself dead before the world is polluted. The Brahmins of the village suffer from the false ego of caste superiority and look down upon the law-caste people. Bhatta, who thrives on money-lending, is symbolic of this type of corrupt brahminical mentality. He has a contempt for this “Gandhi-business”, as he terms it, for it is “nothing but weaving coarse hand-made cloth, not fit for a mop and bellowing out bhajans and bhajans and mixing with the pariahs” (Kanthapura 42). Any reform to equate the untouchables with the Brahmins in resented by the caste-brahmins like Bhatta, Satamma and waterfall Venkamma for they fear their monopoly would be over. The Mahatma they say is making “too much of these carcass – eating Pariahs”. They resent this kind of social pollution. Bhatta remains contemptuously:

“Pariahs now come to the temple door and tomorrow they would like to be in the heart of it. They will one day put themselves in the place of the Brahmins and begin to teach the Vedas”. I heard only the other day that in the Mysore Sanskrit college some Pariahs sought admission. Why, our Beadle Timmayya will come one of these days to ask my daughter in marriage” (P 43).

From Bhatta's conversation with old Ramakrishnayya, one finds his abhorrence for this "pollution" of caste "... the Mahatma has adopted a Pariah girl as a daughter... he may do what he likes. That does not pollute me. But Rama – Rama, really if we have to hang the sacred thread over the shoulders of every pariah... it's impossible. The Swami is also worried over this Pariah movement and he wishes to crush it in its seed. He needs the co-operation of Bhatta to talk to the people and to organize a Brahmin party. Otherwise, brahminism will become kitchen-ashes. The Swami threatens to outcaste every Brahmin who touches a Pariah. Bhatta, too, promises to help him:

"I Bhatta who has been a pontifical Brahmin cannot be on the side of Pariahs. And I know that in our good village there's no Brahmin who has drunk of our holy Himavathy's water and wants caste pollutions" (Kanthapura 45).

He scores at Advocate Rama Sastri who was talking of throwing open his temple to the Pariahs. The mother of the hero is not able to brook the idea that her son should corrupt himself by mixing with the Pariahs. She is shocked at the news of excommunication, which is conveyed to her by waterfall Venkamma. Venkamma calls her son a "Pariah-mixer". She furiously raves against Moorthy's doings. Moorthy, the hero of the novel is inspired with the Gandhian idealism and he does propagate the ideas of social reform by breaking the caste-bar taboos against inter-caste marriages and other evils. He is the first Brahmin in Kanthapura to mix with the Pariahs. When he first enters a Pariah house,

"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 ..." (Kanthapura 105)

And when he returns to Rengamma's house, he feels clean only when he has bathed and changed his clothes and taken a little of the Ganges water. But after that he goes often to the Pariah Quarters and treats the Harijans equally. He brings the best out of them. He forms an anti-caste equality among the people of the country. He is excommunicated by the caste-Brahmins but continues his social work without flinching. The paradox is that while a member of caste-Brahmins do not respond to Moorthy's "Gandhi business", the Sudras are so humanly responsive to Moorthy's call for the freedom struggle. They even feel that if Moorthy touches their milk, it will be sanctified. All the villagers in the Pariah Quarters participate in the Freedom struggle and co-operate remarkably with Moorthy. "The caste-division has been portrayed with all its problem and humanism with regard to the life of the Pariah" says Som Deva (P 46).

Another problem picturized here in this novel is that of drinking toddy. It is learnt that Bhatta goes on a pilgrimage to Khasi with the money from the toddy contract. Most of the coolies and labourers of the Skeffington Estate spend their hard-earned money on today, the only drink they know of. Moorthy and his followers, "the soldiers of the Mahatma" go for the picket the toddy shops. The Satyagrahis squat down before the toddy booth. They see the coolies, men and women, being led by policemen to the toddy booths. There is shower of rain and along with it the shower of lathi blows. The policemen beat the coolies to move forward. When the coolies,

unable to bear the lath blows of the police, go forward to the booths, they are stopped by Moorthy and his men:

"Oh don't go brother! ... Don't go, sister! -oh, don't go, in the name of the Mahatma" The coolies in spite of the blows, reply "By Kenchamma's name we shall not" The Satyagrahis are beaten and kicked till they bleed and are treated mercilessly like beasts. The policemen fill pots with water in the side gutters "and potfuls and potful of water and they pour it in and they lift up our saris and throw it at unnamable places and the water trickles down our limbs and drips down to the earth, and with more beating and more beating we fall back one by one against the earth, one by one we fall by the coolies of the Godaveri ... " (Kanthapura 200)

Despite all their sufferings, they are happy the next day for their picketing has proved to be successful. Some of the coolies are even bold enough to leave their English masters and set up their new huts in the Pariah street. Following this, the people in Rampur picket the Rampur Toll – Gate toddy booth and the people of Siddapur, the Siddapur Tea-Estate toddy booth, and the people of Maddur, the Maddur – Fair toddy booth. The Satyarahis sing as;

"Brother, sisters, friend and all,
The toddy – tree is a crooked tree,
And the toddy milk is scorpion milk" (203)

They advice the villagers against drinking which is considered as an evil.

"Oh, brothers, in the name of the Mahatma, do not drink, for drinking is bad and the Government profits by your debt and your wife goes unclothed and your children unfed and never again will you see a hut and hearth" (Kanthapura 203)

The evils of money and how it affects social life is also one of the problems posed in the novel along with the problem of labour. The novelist gives us an insight into the appalling social conditions of the villagers who fall an easy prey to exploitation from within and without. The poor people are exploited by rich landowners and money-lenders like Bhatta. There is not a Pariah in Kanthapura who does not owe Bhatta something. Bhatta thrives on the interest money he extracts from the poor villagers. Through Bhatta, the novelist lashes the evils of money lending and exploitation of the poor that have crept into the society.

The exploitation of the coolies by the Britishers in the Skeffington coffee estate is pictured vividly in the novel. Many a coolie falls a victim to the profiteering racket. The labourers are fascinated by the rice which is around the estate and get entrapped by the employers." Is there rice?" they had asked and were told, "There is nothing but rice around us". So with their old parents and children and their widowed women, armies of coolies have left their hearth and home and come to work on the plantation. They have been promised to be paid four-anna-bit for each man and a two-anna bit for each woman

for picking up coffee seeds. But in their new land dream, the promise proves to be a dream and “the law of the place’ is that “everybody would get a beating when they deserved one and sweets when they worked well” (70) Moorthy and the other Gandhi men struggle hard to save these coolies from their tyrannical masters. The cruel treatment of the English masters is resented by the Gandhians of the village and they put up a touch fight against the Britishers and the policemen. “On the whole, *Kanthapura* mirrors the social temper of the age” (Deva 53). The prominent social living of the villagers has been spotlighted by Raja Rao in *Kanthapura* which can rightly be called a social document.

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