

Gandhian politics and religion in raja rao's 'kanthapura'



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Gandhi's mass movement during the freedom struggle aimed solely at arousing a nationalistic consciousness which would help in forming up a unique national identity constructed by uniting the masses. Achieving this is not an easy task considering the diversity in religion, caste, creed, etc. of the nation. In order to bring together those diverse sects under a common roof, Gandhi feels the need for secularism and religious tolerance. He professes his secular notion of religion and incites to the mind of the masses, the oneness of men, negating any sectarian religion and caste and class based divisions.

As he observes: Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, political, social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can be done by service of all. And this cannot be done except through one's country.

(Chakrabarti 35) This aspect of the Gandhian thought had an impact on the creative impetus of the Indian novelists in English.

In this paper I will discuss on how Gandhian blending of politics and religion gives an impact on the minds of the Indian masses, especially of the villagers. Taking instances from Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura*, I will seek to show how Gandhian political thoughts and teachings come in the guise of traditional religious terms and how it stirs the innocent and superstitious imaginations of the village folk. Gandhian secularism and spiritual teachings aim to dismantle the rigid social caste based structure, thereby enabling the masses to unite under a common religion, the religion of Truth and Love.

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The social and political programs of Gandhi converge with the religious aspect of his thought thereby making them appealing to the religious and superstitious Indian masses. The Gandhian revolution during the mass-upsurge of the freedom movement was deeply rooted in the religious tradition of the nation. As Rama Jha puts it, “ with an uncanny understanding of his country men, Gandhi is the first Indian leader to realize that it was impossible to revolutionize them without drawing upon the resources of their religion” (Jha 88).

India was religious by tradition and therefore in his political and social programs, Gandhi views religion and politics as inextricably intertwined. Gandhi was well aware of the Indian people’s lack of enthusiasm in collective actions and felt the need for stimulating their own indigenous resources. He based his thoughts on the traditional myths and religious terms which have their groundings on a more secular notion. In his novel Kanthapura, Raja Rao extensively observes the traditional religious sensibility of the villagers of Kanthapura and depicts how they endorse and follow the tenets of the Gandhian thoughts as words of God.

Religion is deeply in the blood of the Indian masses and is inseparable to their life. The people of Kanthapura are deeply religious and superstitious like any other Indian villagers. Every sphere of their life activities are related to and influenced by religious myths and legends. This religious sensibility of the villagers is well understood by Gandhi and hence his political thoughts are propagated to the masses through its spiritual aspects. Prior to the advent of the Gandhian thoughts, Kanthapura lives a life of ignorance and

religious superstitions keeping their absolute faith on Goddess Kenchamma as their only protector.

Their life activities are mainly engaged in the devotion and rituals performed to offer to the Goddess. Separations between the castes are strictly observed and the atmosphere is deeply conservative. The whole scene of these innocent serenity and conservative rigidity begin to be disturbed with the advent of the Gandhian thoughts through Moorthy, the “ little mahatma” of the village. However bringing in the very sophisticated tenets of Gandhian thoughts and making them understood to the villagers, who are deeply rooted in their age-old religious customs and traditions, is not easy.

Raja Rao very minutely observes and depicts how larger political and social discourses of Gandhi are blended with traditional religious myths and terms which are familiar to the village folks. The whole change begins with the construction of the Kanthapurishwari temple as suggested by Moorthy. It is here where all the ‘ Gandhi business’ in this novel centers around. In fact as the narrator recounts, “ that’s where all the trouble began. ” With the consecration of the temple, routine religious gatherings and rituals are performed. Sankara-jayanthi, Bhajan and Harikathas are regularly organized.

Politics begins to enter these religious rituals and teachings when during one of the Harikathas, Jayaramachar, “ the famous Harikatha-man... (who) had done Harikatha even before the Mahatma,” cleverly mixes already familiar religious myths with contemporary political reality. Gandhian thoughts are ingeniously embedded within the religious discourses. The narrator doubtfully recalls the story of Siva and Parvati: Parvati in penance becomes

the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! ‘ Siva is the three-eyed,’ he says, ‘ and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khaddar. (Kanthapura, p. 14) And the narrator further remembers: And then he talks of Damayanti and Sakunthala and Yasodha and everywhere there is something about our country and something about Swaraj. Never had we heard Harikathas like this. (Kanthapura, p. 14) Another Harikatha, the narrator recalls, is about the birth of Gandhi. This provoke a shock to the listeners as they never expect a story of an ordinary human being as a subject of Harikathas. The birth of Gandhi is narrated in mythical terms as an avatar of lord Siva: And lo!

When the sage was still partaking of the pleasures Brahma offered him hospitality, there was born in Gujarat a son such as the world has never beheld... You remember how Krishna, when he was but a babe of four, had began to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. So too our Mohandas began to fight against the enemies of the country. (kanthapura, p. 16) In the imagination of the villagers, Gandhi is visualized as the very incarnation of lord Krishna and has been born in order to “ slay the serpent of the foreign rule” (kanthapura, p. 16).

The spiritual teachings of Gandhi appeal to the religious mind of the villagers: Fight, says he, but harm no soul. Love all, says he, Hindu, Mohomedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God. Don’t be attached to riches, says he, for riches create passions, and passions create attachment, and attachment hides the face of Truth. Truth must you tell, he says, for Truth is God, and verily, it is the only God I know. (Kanthapura, p.

16-17) Since the actual stories are familiar to the religious elders, the immediate reaction to the modified versions of the myth is of skeptical one.

This shows the difficulty to bend the superstitious mind of the villagers. In order to convince the elders, the young followers of Gandhi try to project the image of Gandhi as “ a saint, a holy man. ” Unable to stay away longer from the religious gatherings they eventually listen to the politically infused version of the myths and slowly and ultimately adapted to the contents of the stories. Through the juxtaposition of the greatness of Gods and demigods and Gandhi, gandhi’s image is projected and assimilated to the minds of the villagers as “ a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint” (Kanthapura, p. 7). Gandhi’s notion of religion is that of a secular one. Mohit chakrabarti very succinctly puts it that: Religion is as one should be as oneself. To Gandhi, it is more than one should be as an individual alone. One should be, to be truly religious, one as an individual in relation to others. Bereft of the well-being of others, one ceases to be oneself as a religious being. Religion, therefore, acts like a mirror through which one looks at oneself and, at the same time, looks at others in order to eliminate otherliness and embrace oneself in oneness.

It is the source of endless unison of man and man. (Chakrabarti 34) For Gandhi action is very important, action in purity and perfection, through which man can achieve self-realization. With the complete realization of self, man can identify with other fellow men, a unified living force and realization of God. Moorthy’s thoughts and actions are guided by this principle which prompts him to control himself when he faces humiliations thinking that, “ I shall love even my enemies. The Mahatma says we should love even our

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enemies” (Kanthapura, p. 9). The whole actions and thoughts of Moorthy are totally Gandhian. His vision of Gandhi which inspired him for his actions is presented in a mystical way. Following Gandhi, he gives importance to self – self-conduct and self-realization. Moorthy holds himself as responsible for the eruption of violence at the skeffigton coffee estate and performs fasting and meditation for three days as a penance. Rao invests the whole fasting ritual with mystical and legendary associations (Rama Jha 101).

He talks very much like Gandhi: ‘ the great enemy is in us, Rangamma,’ said moorthy, slowly, ‘ hatred is in us. If only we could not hate, if only we would show fearless, calm affection towards our fellow men, we would be stronger, and not only would the enemy yield, but he would be converted.

(kanthapura, p. 93) The Gandhian call for the necessary affection towards the fellow human being is hard to be grasped by the mind of the villagers. As the narrator comments, “ Rangamma did not understand this, neither, to tell you the truth, did any of us” (Kanthapura, p. 3). However even though they find it hard to get the real import of the Gandhian thoughts, they still follow everything Moorthy says as they come from Mahatma. To their mind, the Mahatma is “ mighty and God-beaming” and his every word is divine to them, which they ought to obey. Therefore it is easy now to politicize the people by bringing everything through the angle of religion. Every political act is associated with religious rituals and ceremonies so that the political import of the actions are received willingly by the mind of the people.

For instance, the election of the local congress committee is preceded by a religious procession and Bhajan. When he is anointed the Mahatma of the village folk, Moorthy takes the vow in the name of God: Then he looked back
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towards the bright god in the sanctum, and closed his eyes and sent up a prayer, and, whispering to himself, ' Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! ' he rang the bell and spoke to them of spinning and ahimsa and truth. (Kanthapura, p. 106-107) Satyagraha is a sharp weapon used by Gandhi during the freedom movement.

He locates the importance of Satyagraha in a religious and spiritual reason. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar, in the essay ' The Making of a Mahatma: The Construct of Gandhi as a National Icon,' explains it that: Satyagraha was based on spiritual force that would transform the opponent, reduce conflict and create harmony. It was a way of subverting any binary opposition between enemies by refusing to operate within the codes of that enmity... Satyagraha meant insistence on truth which " dynamically expressed means love. The law of love, supposedly dominant in the private realm only, was to become a potent political force in the Gandhian ideology... To suffer was a more powerful political strategy than to cause others to suffer. Thus Satyagraha was essentially a religious movement, a process of penance and purification. (Bhatnagar 49-50) When he is searched by the police and about to be arrested, an atmosphere of conflict looms over the crowd. Here Moorthy calls for " peace and love and order. " He asks them to " give yourself up to them. hat is the true spirit of the Satyagrahi" (Kanthapura, p. 120-121). After his arrest the villagers fast and pray for him. When informed about the arrangement of hiring lawyers to defend him, Moorthy rejects the idea since he wants only Truth to speak for him and no one else. Truth is what Moorthy, as for Gandhi, believes in and preaches: Truth will have to change it. I shall speak that which Truth prompteth, and Truth needeth no

defence. (Kanthapura, p. 123) After his release from the prison, Moorthy readies for a new beginning, this time with action.

He calls to built a temple for ' Mother India' by the actions of the masses: When the temple is built, stone by stone, and man by man, and the bell hung to the roof and the eagle-tower shaped and planted, we shall invoke the Mother to reside with us in dream and in life. India then will live in a temple of our making. (Kanthapura, p. 169) This political dream of a liberated India is transmitted to the mind of the village folk in religious image. Responding to Moothy's call for action, the women of the village begin non-violent protests with prayers and blessings from Godess Kenchamma.

They consider the marching forward of the movement as a religious pilgrimage seeing the Mahatma as Lord Shiva. In the middle of the journey if they are discouraged by fear of the white force, this fear is overpowered by yet another force deep inside them and ultimately resubmitted to the cause: But some strange fever rushed up from the feet, it rushed up and with it our hair stood on end and our ears grew hot and something powerful shook us from head to foot ... such a terror took hold of us, that we put the water-jugs on our hips, and we rushed back home, trembling and gasping with the anger of gods ... Moorthy forgive us!

Kenchamma forgive us! We shall go. Oh! We shall go to the end of the pilgrimage. (Kanthapura, p. 231) Such is the effect of the Gandhian strategy of politicizing the masses with religious fervor. The political commitment of Gandhi converge with the religious devotion of the villagers which effect to the inseparable nature of politics and religion to the Gandhian thought.

With the above discussion we can see how Gandhi's political program which appeals to the masses because of its religious and spiritual associations affects the villagers of Kanthapura in Raja Rao's novel Kanthapura. The complex tenets of Gandhian thought, which is strange to the villagers, are made alive when projected in religious terms and associated to religious myths and figures. Works Cited Rao, Raja. Kanthapura. Oxford University Press, 1974. Chakrabarti, Mohit. Society and Religion: Gandhian Cohesion. " Gandhian Religion. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House. 1994. Bhatnagar, Vinita Dhondiyal. " The Making of a Mahatma: The Construct of Gandhi as a National Icon. " Readings in Indian English Literature: Nation, Culture and Identity. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, 2001. Jha, Rama. " Raja Rao: Quest for Spiritual Regeneration Through Gandhian Thought. " Gandhian Thought and Indo-Anglian Novelists. Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1983.