

NATURE OF GANDHIJI'S APPEAL: RELIGION OF HUMANITY WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA AND MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a legend during his life time. This was neatly captured by the literati in their novels. Mulk Raj Anand created a myth about the Mahatma as incarnation of Hindu gods in the novel, "Untouchable". Similarly, the linguistics and stylistics of Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" are reminiscent of ancient Indian epics. Both, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, succeeded in imparting mythical dimension to Gandhiji's personality in "Untouchable" and "Kanthapura", respectively. Both novels were written in English in the mid-thirties. It must be admitted in all fairness that in mythologizing Gandhiji and imparting legendary qualities to him, both were inspired by Gandhiji's religion of humanity. This paper is an attempt to understand the background for the composition of these two popular novels.

Keywords: British rule, communal harmony, Hari Katha, Krishna, Mahatma Gandhi, myth, Vishnu.

INTRODUCTION

On the occasion of 70th birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, Einstein one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century paid him a tribute interspersed with epithets that smacked of the '*holiness of the heart's affections*': "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon the earth". Little did Einstein realize that by making generations of people dubious about the corporeal frame of the personality of one of the greatest sons of history, he was not only imparting a mythopoeic quality in his estimation, but also imparting a quality full of the legendary character to the savant. Such was the magnetic appeal of the social reformer, freedom fighter and crusader of human rights that myths began to be formed about him wherever he left the impress of his footprints.

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Nicholson Kai(1972) in his perceptive work *A Presentation of Social Problems in the Indo-Anglian and the Anglo-Indian novel* makes a very pertinent remark about the presence of the Mahatma in the Indo-Anglian novels after the thirties. "A character who loomed large in Indo-Anglian fiction during and after his lifetime is Mahatma Gandhi" (p. 56). Sometimes the Mahatma appears as a person as in *Untouchable* (1935) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). It influences the central character Moorthy who can be regarded as a rural Gandhi. His ideology influences Mulk Raj Anand in his novel, *The Road*. There are other books that represent Gandhian thought and politics like in Venkataramani's *Murugan, The Tiller* (1927), and *Kandan, The Patriot* (1932). The Gandhian ideology is worked out in C.N. Zutshi's *Motherland*(1944), Zeenat Futehally's, *Zohra* (1951) and Manohar Malgaonkar's, *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964).

This article is a humble effort to show the inexplicable nature of Gandhiji's appeal and the way he was transformed into a myth and a legend in his lifetime. Both Anand and Raja Rao found appeal in him more irresistibly than any other conventional religion.

SETTING THE TWO NOVELS

Anand and Raja Rao succeeded in imparting mythical dimension to Gandhiji's personality in *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura*, respectively. Both novels were written in English in the mid- thirties. It must be admitted in all fairness that in mythologizing Gandhiji and imparting legendary qualities to him, both were inspired by Gandhiji's religion of humanity.

It is in the fitness of things to understand the background for the composition of Anand's novel *Untouchable*. In April, 1929, Anand went to Sabarmati Ashram and met the Mahatma in the sweltering heat of Gujarat. He gave a copy of his novel, '*Bakha*' to Gandhiji. Gandhiji was vehemently opposed to any novel that depicted any romantic love story of a boy and a girl. Anand had to do a lot of haranguing to convince a fastidious Gandhiji that the novel that he had written was actually composed on the same lines as that of the Mahatma's story on a sweeper boy, Uka.

In the course of his stay at Sabarmati Ashram for three months, Anand had a feeling of usufruct. Living and working under the guidance of Mahatma, his moral values registered a sea-change. He learned to value above all, a life of sincerity, truth and simplicity, the sterling qualities embodied in the personality of the Mahatma.

At the end of those three months, when he read some portions of the novel to Gandhiji, the latter suggested that he should cut down some irrelevant portions of the novel, particularly those pages which presented Bakha as a Bloomsbury intellectual, occupied in reflections and dreams. Acting upon Gandhiji's hortative, Anand revised the entire novel. The size of the novel was cut drastically from two hundred and fifty pages to one hundred and fifty pages. Finally, Gandhiji gave his approval to the publication of Anand's *Untouchable*.

Gandhiji's words of inspiration, his role as a social reformer, his civilized grace, his sobriety stemming from his Indianness and impeccable simplicity created an indelible impression on his mind. The magnetism of Gandhiji's personality had cast such a spell on Anand's mind that he decided to present him in person in the novel. Small wonder, he showed Mahatma

Gandhiji addressing a mammoth crowd in Golbagh on the problem of untouchability in the novel *Untouchable* and in doing so, presented him as a revolutionary iconoclast.

Colonel Hutchinson of the Salvation Army had proselytized Bakha and tried to prevail upon him the spiritual and social advantages of his conversion to Christianity. But his talks wearing on the importance of social equality in Christianity was nothing more than a 'conundrum' to Bakha. Chewing the cud of Hutchinson's words of sermonisation, Bakha stumbled upon a huge crowd of people at Golbagh ground. Such was the magnetic appeal of Gandhiji's personality that it cut deep into different cross-sections of the Indian society. Bakha's eyes could see Hindu traders from the markets of Bulashah dressed in elegant silk, Kashmiri Muhammadans from the carpet factories, Sikh rustics from close by villages, red faced Pathans, swarthy skinned Christian girls of the Salvation Army all had thronged "to meet the Mahatma, to pay homage to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. (*Untouchable* pp. 126-127).

People from various cultures and religions had assembled at Golbagh to listen to the spiritual message of the Mahatma. The scene is indicative of the nature of Gandhiji's appeal. Gandhiji's message of unity can bind people of different faiths and cultures. Anand glorifies the image of the Mahatma because he knows from the core of his heart that the untouchable section of the Indian society, the Mahatma is no less than a god who can wipe away the last vestiges of untouchability from the country. Bakha's uncertainty about the would-be speech of the Mahatma is clouded by doubts. He asks himself, "Is he really going to talk about the outcastes, about us, about Chota, Ramcharan my father and me? (*Untouchable*, p. 132). His doubts about the integrity of the Mahatma are set at rest when suddenly the voice of the social reformer rings loud and bold: I regard untouchability as the greatest blot on Hinduism" (*Untouchable*, p. 137). Then Gandhiji makes the emotional declaration: If I have to be born I should wish to be born as an untouchable so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and affronts levelled at them in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from their miserable condition. (*Untouchable*, p. 138).

Bakha is further moved by the sincere declaration of the Mahatma to include the outcastes in the mainstream of the Indian society: public wells, roads, schools and temples should be opened to the untouchables. When Gandhiji becomes critical of the unclean habits of the untouchables and enjoins upon them to inculcate habits of cleanliness, Bakha blames the Mahatma in his heart of hearts.

Anand creates a myth about the Mahatma. To several people in the crowd he is an incarnation of the gods, Vishnu and Krishna. Bakha listens closely to a Hindu as he blurts out saying, "the Sarkar is afraid of him" (*Untouchable*, p.152). The vociferous Hindu supplements the statement by saying that the local magistrate had withdrawn his order that previously banned the entry of Gandhiji to Bulashah. Another Hindu from the crowd is quick to state that the British government had released Gandhiji from jail without any terms and conditions. Meanwhile, a rustic emerges from the crowd to enquire if Gandhiji can overthrow the government. A babu standing close at hand replies that Gandhiji not only has the power to overthrow the British government but also has the power to change the world. This hyperbolic extreme reinforces the mythical image of the Mahatma. The babu grows voluble in his praise of Gandhiji. Without mincing words, he speaks of the British government and states loudly

that the British government is nothing before the Mahatma. Then he showers encomiums on Gandhi's religious culture and states in no uncertain terms that it is India's religious culture that makes her superior to the West. He further states that neither cigarettes nor sensual pleasure can lead people to the path of religious discipline which is found in India and this religious discipline ushers in the highest form of bliss in the world. He affirms that Gandhiji would show the path of religious discipline to the people of the modern world. Besides this, he would teach the new generation the love of God. A person in the crowd listens to the words of the Mahatma with rapt attention. To this stranger Gandhi was a legend, a tradition and an oracle (*Untouchable*, p.153). The babu had told him of the numerous miracles which the Mahatma had performed. On several occasions, he had heard that Gandhiji was an incarnation of Lord Krishna.

From this we infer that the local people were so carried away by the social and political reforms of Gandhiji that they either saw him as a saint or an incarnation of God. The lower castes were trying to align themselves with the Muslims and the Christians and the efforts of Colonel Hutchinson evinced that. This was an alarming threat to the Hindu community and the Hindu community was the very model of the nation. Bakha knew that on account of his being a member of the low caste there was an inseparable barrier between himself and the crowd. He was hopeful that the only man who could forge a unity with the crowd was none other than Gandhiji. Anand opined that Gandhiji was in everybody's mind including Bakha (*Untouchable*, p. 151). This was not only a significant pointer to the mass appeal of Gandhiji but also a pointer to Gandhi's religion of humanity.

The linguistics and stylistics of *Kanthapura* are reminiscent of ancient Indian epics. The village Kanthapura is an archetypal Indian village of South India where Mahatma Gandhi is a living presence. Gandhiji's philosophy of life and political struggle are truly mirrored by the thoughts and actions of multiple characters in the novel. It is Moorthy who gives hands and feet to Gandhiji's ideal of Satyagraha. Even the other characters who come under the sphere of his influence try to uphold the Gandhian ideal in theory and practice. The Skeffington Coffee Estate becomes a hotbed of politics where the pattern of British oppression recurs in the literary carpet of Kanthapura. *Kanthapura* is a unique novel in which Rao exploits the elements of the romance, the epic and the symbolism of the feeble. The ten turbulent years of national history resonate across the pages of the novel beginning with Gandhiji's renowned Dandi March during the Salt Satyagraha and culminating in the Civil Disobedience Movement. By virtue of it being a *Sthala Purana* it recapitulates the legendary exploits of Rama and Krishna, the two incarnations of Lord Narayana who occupy lofty positions in the synod of mythological gods. Rao manages to integrate broad Indian experience and Gandhian philosophy in the novel, *Kanthapura*:

The three levels of action in the novel, political, social and religious are all related to unified concept of India both as a tradition and as a living culture as a magnificent past to be rediscovered in the enormous present. (*The Fiction of Raja Rao*, p. 49)

The unruffled and placid life of the people in the village of Kanthapura is disturbed when Moorthy underscores the importance of the Satyagraha Movement in their lives. The people of Kanthapura rend the skies with their slogans, 'Vande Mataram', 'Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai'

and '*Inquilab Jindabad*'. Moorthy encourages the people to boycott foreign clothes and don swadeshi khaddar. He distributes free spinning wheels to the villagers so that they can spin cotton yarn. By exhorting people of all faiths to take to spinning and by emphasizing the fact that the Mahatma spins for two hours every day and likens it to a prayer, Moorthy raises the practice of spinning to the pedestal of a religious ritual.

It is through the *Hari Katha* that Gandhiji's religion of humanity is expatiated in the novel. Jayaramachar is the Hari Katha man. As he narrates his story, he weaves the Gandhian teachings into his narrative. He makes use of the Siva- Parvati story to explain the functioning of Gandhiji. When Jayaramachar likens Siva, the three-eyed god to three eyed Swaraj, we appreciate Rao's unique manner of showing Gandhiji's religion of humanity at work. Swaraj, in the opinion of Jayaramachar, contains the universal message of Gandhiji: Self-Purification, Hindu-Muslim unity and Khaddar. Jayaramachar first recalls the glorious past of India and the celebrated kings of Indian history as Chandragupta, Ashoka, Vikramaditya and Akbar. In the same breath he extols the sages as Krishna, Buddha, Shankara and Ramanuja. Then in a rueful manner he narrates how the land guarded by the Himalayas and watered by the Ganges and Cauvery is enslaved by the red-skinned British. The rishis implore Brahma to do something miraculous to rid the nation of foreign tyranny. The god showers his blessings, and therefore, the birth of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in a family in Gujarat can be attributed to the blessings of the gods. Gandhiji has waged a relentless battle against the serpent of foreign regime. Jayaramachar is sanguine that the time is not too distant for Gandhiji to bring Swaraj to India. It may be divined that the story of Gandhiji's birth and life is an allegory of India's struggle for freedom.

Apart from the Siva myth, Jayaramachar makes deft use of the Krishna myth to extol the achievements of Gandhiji in the freedom struggle. In the first case, he likens Gandhiji to Krishna who will slay the serpent 'Kalia' (the British rulers). Jayaramachar equates Gandhiji's teachings to Moorthy to those of Lord Krishna's teachings to Arjuna in Bhagvadgita. Just as Lord Krishna inspired Krishna to take cudgels against his sworn enemies, the Kauravas, similarly, Gandhiji inspired Moorthy to show passive opposition to his bête noir, the British. Rao's use of myths heightens the parallelisms and contrasts in the novel. As *Kanthapura* limpidly draws to its finale, Rao institutes a parallel between the myth of Ramarajaya and Gandhiji's call for Swaraj. Gandhiji, in a state of exile in London is like India (Sita) trying to wrest back Sita from the tyrannical yoke of the British (Ravana). Jawahar Lal Nehru (Brother Bharata) anxiously awaits the return of Rama after the Second Round Table Conference.

Rao's mythical technique in *Kanthapura* deserves accolades. Though Rao has made use of the political background to use his own myths yet they have an archetypal significance. By making fresh myths on the life of Gandhiji and by dovetailing them to the legend of Rama and Krishna with which the common people can identify themselves, Rao succeeds admirably in throwing into bold relief Gandhiji's religion of humanity.

Gandhiji's religion of humanity is felt by members of all castes and creeds and even many Muslims wholeheartedly appreciate his philosophy of communal harmony and idea of secularism. A Muslim figure in Khushwant Singh's, *Train to Pakistan* speaks highly of Gandhiji's religion of humanity and the universality of his appeal: "If we have no faith in God

then we are like animals", said the Muslim gravely. "Look at Gandhi! I hear he reads the Koran Sharif and the Unjeel along his Vedas and Shastras. People sing his praise in the four corners of the earth. I have seen a picture in a newspaper of Gandhiji's prayer meeting. It showed a lot of white men and women sitting cross-legged. One white girl had her eyes shut. They said she was the Big Lord's daughter. You see Meet Singh, even the English respect a man of religion." (*Train to Pakistan*, p. 63)

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