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CULTURAL VALUES OF THE RAMAYANA AND ITS REFLECTIONS
IN RAJA RAO'S 'KANTHAPURA'

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Abstract

In this study, I seek to analyse the intrinsic cultural values of the great Indian epic The Ramayana and its reflections in Raja Rao's fiction Kanthapura which aims at throwing light on the fact that Indian Culture is unique and ubiquitous, great and grand, precious and profound. It is one of the oldest established cultures, which possesses a great heritage of values and traditions. It has been described as the first and the supreme culture in the world. The greatest Indian epic The Ramayana is replete with enduring values and timeless appeal which carve a lasting impact on the Indian mind. Its intriguing and fascinating story bewitches all categories of people starting from the illiterate to the elite, from the peasant to the perfectionist, from the writer to the religious preacher with a profound sense of heroic tradition and ethical living. The Ramayana, which has the potential to pull everyday existence to the higher realms of enlightenment and right living, symbolizes Indian ethos and cultural history forming a refractory living force in myriads of minds. This great epic has influenced and enriched the literary traditions of India as well. Indian

English writers have exploited its narrative and cultural values in the light of their own times in history. Raja Rao has revisited and reshaped the epic theme and its characters more stupendously in his illustrious novel Kanthapura which is based on the patterns of The Ramayana. He picks up the theme of the influence of Gandhiji and his political movement on the people of the caste-ridden village Kanthapura which becomes the testing ground for the age-old rituals and religious practices. His work is a masterpiece of a fictional rendering of a localized myth. The finding of the study is to discover the intrinsic values of the Indian culture embedded in the greatest Indian epic The Ramayana which popularized and immortalized Raja Rao's Kanthapura due to the honest and adept use of the epic sources.

Keywords: Culture, epic, Kanthapura, myth, The Ramayana, Sthala purana

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1.0 Introduction

This paper envisages analyzing the intrinsic values of the great Indian epic The Ramayana and its reflections in Raja Rao's famous fiction Kanthapura which aims at throwing light on the fact that the Indian culture is great and grand, precious and profound, unique and ubiquitous. It is one of the oldest established cultures, which possesses a great heritage of values and traditions. It has been described as the first and the supreme culture in the world. The popularity of the fiction Kanthapura traces back to the great Indian epic The Ramayana which is heard and read with immense pleasure and piety enchanting the heart of the rich and the poor, the privileged and the unprivileged, the intellectual and the illiterate, the peasant and the perfectionist, the writer and the religious preacher, the rural and the urban alike.

1.2 Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to analyse the intrinsic cultural values of the great Indian epic The Ramayana its reflections in Raja Rao's famous fiction Kanthapura which aims at throwing light on the ancient most supreme Indian culture replete with a great heritage of values and traditions and derives immense philosophical sustenance from this great Indian epic.

There is often a general notion that The Ramayana is a product of epic

imagination. The supernaturalism and spirituality of the Rama-katha allure and enchant the readers and listeners. The fanciful descriptions of events, the doctrine of incarnation fascinate the reader's imaginative mind. But behind this fascinating narration, the poet beautifully delineates the real picture of the ancient Indian society, religion, state-craft etc. In spite of being a superb specimen of colorful poetic composition, the epic can be taken as a documentary of store-house of evidences of sublime knowledge, classic heritage and priceless cultural glory of India's past.

1.3 Rationale of the study

This study is undertaken to explore the reflections of The Ramayana and the intrinsic values of Indian culture in Raja Rao's fiction Kanthapura as a social document which tries to prove that great values and virtues never go unrewarded. The rationale of this study lies in the far-reaching and lasting effect of the universal appeal of The Ramayana on all the strata of society and the the message disseminated by Raja Rao's famous fiction Kanthapura for a healthy social, political, moral, spiritual and cultural living.

1.4 What is culture?

Culture includes everything that a society of people thinks, says, does or makes, its systems, attitudes and feelings. It encompasses religion, food, dress, language, marriage, music and many more. It is

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learned and transmitted from generation to generation. According to Zimmerman (2017), “Culture is a shared pattern of behaviors, interactions, cognitive constructs and understanding that are learned by socialization. Thus, it can be seen as the growth of a group identity fostered by social patterns unique to the group.” Besides, culture of head or heart is not real culture but culture of head and heart is real culture. It helps one understand one’s ancestral values and gives the meaning of life. Cultural traditions serve to link one with one’s ancestors, which are valuable and should not be lost.

1.5 Indian culture and its intrinsic values

Indian culture is by far the oldest established culture which possesses a great heritage of values and traditions. Tradition is an approach followed over the years and handed down from generations to generations, ensuring that it leads to a high degree of spirituality and honour. In India, it is traditional to respect the elders, be truthful and honest and help out others in need. It is also called traditional to celebrate cultural festivals and religious activities with family and neighbors. Tradition leads to the right approach to marriage and death as has been followed over centuries. Millions of Indians even today cherish in their minds the stories of their ancient epic The Ramayana which symbolizes the Indian ethos and cultural history identified with it.

1.6 The Ramayana as an epic

The great Indian cultural values and heritage owe their existence to Valmiki’s epic story - The Ramayana. Culture of India is actually embedded in this great epic which tells about the prolonged exile of Lord Rama, His wife Sita, brother Laxman who lived with untold miseries through trials and tribulations for fourteen years when Sita was kidnapped by the demon king Ravana, the ruler of Lanka and by this, Lord Rama killed the kidnapper, rescued his wife and established rule of justice as a mark of victory of Good over Evil.

The greatest Indian epic The Ramayana is replete with enduring values and timeless appeal which carve a lasting impact on the Indian mind. The Ramayana, which has the potential to pull everyday existence to higher realms enlightenment and right living, symbolizes Indian ethos and cultural history forming a refractory living force in myriads of minds. Through the millennia of its popularity, The Ramayana has attracted the interest of many kinds of people from different social, economic, educational and religious backgrounds. It has served as a bed-time story for countless children and at the same time intellectuals, thinkers, social reformers and philosophers have found it a subject worthy of their intellectual energies.

“The Ramayana is not simply the story of Sri Rama but an exquisite piece of

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literature in Sanskrit verse of priceless beauty containing seven kandas with countless similes, metaphors, allegories, hyperboles and flights of poetic imagination all of which make it a supreme piece of literature of matchless elegance for all times”, (Kompella 2016). Srinivasa Sastry hailed it as one of the noblest monuments of poetic genius whether we judge it by the grandeur of the theme or by the appeal that it makes to a devout heart. A great scholar K.M. Munshi says that The Ramayana is an epic where character is the determining factor of life, where virtue takes precedence over wealth, where the spirit of service transcends the exercise of power, where piety is adored and self despised, where the meanest is equal to the highest.”

1.7 Raja Rao’s fiction Kanthapura

Raja Rao picks up the theme of the influence of Gandhiji and his political movement on the people of the caste-ridden village Kanthapura which becomes the testing ground for age-old rituals and religious practices. His famous work Kanthapura (1938) is a masterpiece of a fictional rendering of a localized myth. “The tremendous religious activity, the mysticising of Gandhi and mother India and the spiritualization of the Freedom Movement within the framework of Indian cultural tradition suggest Raja Rao’s zeal for Indian philosophy” (Dayal, 1983). The plot is laid in an imaginary village in this novel. Raja Rao makes the narrative in the form of Sthalapurana and an old lady Achakka is the

narrator of the story. Moorthy, a young man of the village, brings the message of Gandhi to his people, and starts his own Satyagraha movement against the British. The police tried its best to suppress the movement. The people of Kanthapura remain staunch followers of Moorthy even when he is imprisoned. Moorthy finally succeeds in his mission and brings freedom to the people.

Kanthapura, on the surface level, recounts the rise of a Gandhian nationalist movement in a small South Indian village of the same name. The story is narrated by Achakka, an elderly Brahmin woman with an all-encompassing knowledge about everyone in her village. She narrates the story like a sthala-purana, the traditional history of a village, its people, its gods, and local practices. The very interesting facet of the novel is the charming world that the readers are introduced to. It is not a world that is fictional or unrealistic. Rather, it is a world we are all familiar with. “Raja Rao relocated the events of the novel in a rural area. One might wonder why Rao did not select one of India’s cities, which were being ruled by the British. This could be because of the fact that villages had always formed India. Before India even came under the British rule, the village had been the only existing form of a community.

Kanthapura begins by Achakka's lengthy first sentence, which situates her village in the broader context of India and

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the British Empire as a whole. She does this from the viewpoint of someone traversing the landscape. The flood of place names she provides demonstrates her deep familiarity with the place and establishes her as an authority on her village. Dominant castes like Brahmins are privileged to get the best region of the village, while lower castes such as Pariahs are marginalized. Despite this classist system, the village retains its long-cherished traditions of festivals in which all castes interact and the villagers are united. The village is believed to be protected by a local deity named Kenchamma. She supposedly battled a demon “ages, ages ago” and has protected Kanthapura’s people ever since. The villagers frequently pray to her for help, perform ceremonies to honour her, and thank her for their good fortune. Kenchamma exemplifies the traditional religion that Kanthapura’s people gradually come to leave behind.

Nature plays a significant role among the population of the village because the mountains around the village and the river have always been present, even long before the first child was born in Kanthapura. All elements of nature have a strong power over the village. In the novel, the protagonist Moorthy is a Brahmin. Everybody in the village calls him as ‘corner house Moorthy’ or ‘our Moorthy’. The villagers treat him as a ‘small mountain’ while Gandhi as ‘big mountain’. Moorthy

goes about from door to door carrying the message of Gandhi even to the Pariah Quarter and made to know about the political, social, economic resurrections.

The British government accuses Moorthy of provoking the townspeople to inflict violence and arrests him. While Moorthy spends the next three months in prison, the women of Kanthapura take charge, forming a volunteer corps under Rangamma's (major female character) leadership. Rangamma instills a sense of patriotism among the women by telling stories of notable women from Indian history. The novel ends with Moorthy and the town looking to the future and planning to continue their fight for independence.

Thus, ‘Kanthapura’ evokes a sense of community and freedom, construed as a spiritual quality which overcomes all bounds and crosses all barriers. In order to allow an easy interchange between the world of men and the world of gods, between contemporaneity and antiquity, Rao thus equips his story with a protagonist whose role it is to motivate the villagers into joining the political cause of India's struggle for freedom without reservation.” (TOI Inernet, 2 Mar 2021)

1.8 Reflection of The Ramayana in Kanthapura

The Ramayana has influenced and enriched the literary traditions of India to a

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great extent. Raja Rao has revisited and reshaped the epic theme and its characters more stupendously in his illustrious novel *Kanthapura* which is based on the patterns of *The Ramayana*. The way in which the epic is narrated by the sage Valmiki, *Kanthapura* is narrated by an elderly woman Achakka in the same way. She compares Gandhiji with Rama, India with Sita, Gandhi's going to England to Rama's exile and Indians with Bharata. As Sita is captured and tortured by Ravana, India is captured and tortured by the Red-men. Like Rama's rescue of Sita, Gandhi struggles to free India from the British. In other words, Raja Rao presents the same old mythical story of *Ramayana* in a new way. In his book *Fiction of Raja Rao*, K.R. Rao (1980) writes: "Three levels of action in the novel, political, social and religious, all are related to unified concept of India both as a tradition and and as a living culture, as a magnificent past to be rediscovered in the enormous present."

Raja Rao has a tremendous myth-making consciousness and myth meanders through his fictional fabric. "*Kanthapura* vividly shares the Puranas" (Paranjape, 1998). He expresses in his novels a deep pre-occupation with Indian cultural heritage and tries to reconcile old cultural tradition to the modern world. His chief concern is the cultural heritage and its powerful impact on the lives of people. He delves deep into the psyche of the individuals and exposes the

aspects of Indian mind coloured by myth. His famous fiction *Kanthapura* bears imprints of mythic allusions from *The Ramayana*. The effect and impact of *The Ramayana* are persistent in this novel which lends a philosophical profundity to the theme of the freedom movement. The reflections of *The Ramayana* are a real testimony to the fact that myths impart a new significance to our contemporary existence.

With his interview with Shiva Niranjana, Raja Rao has said:

"I like to write like a Purana. I like the Puranic conception in fact that is the only conception of novel for me. I don't want to write like a foreign novelist. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the Puranic form."

1.9 Findings

The finding of the study shows that the Indian culture is great and grand, precious and profound. It is by far the oldest established culture which is embedded in *The Ramayana* possessing a great heritage of values and traditions. Discreet reflections of *The Ramayana* in the fiction *Kanthapura* has therefore popularized and immortalized this novel.

1.10 Conclusion

The great Hindu epic *Ramayan* teaches Indians the idealistic way and manners of living life for a peaceful and

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eternal existence. It contains the magnanimous knowledge of philosophy, customs, religions, polity, social life, ethics, code of conduct etc. "The Ramayana is not a mere presentation of transmuted legend and folklore, but a highly artistic representation of intimate significances of life, the living presentation of a strong and noble thinking, a developed ethical and aesthetic mind a high social and political ideal, the ensouled image of a great culture" (Sri Aurovindo, 1990: 282-293).

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