

KANTHAPURA

Raja Rao

(1938)

Story *Kanthapura* tells the story of a village of the same name in south India in the 1930s, during the height of the struggle for Independence. The author, drawing on his own personal experience of the region, describes the village in some detail, including the number of houses (120) and people (700). We also get a sketch of the castes in the village, including Brahmins, merchants, artisans, labourers, servants and Untouchables. More important than any one person, however, is Kenchamma, the presiding goddess of the village.

The story, narrated by Achakka, a Brahmin widow, is the life-story of Moorthy, another Brahmin. Moorthy leaves university to settle Kanthapura in order to dedicate his life to the Gandhian cause of rural uplift and eradication of poverty, as prerequisites for an independent India. Moorthy's idealism is severely tested in the crucible of reality that is village life. People aren't interested in ideas, but in food and land. The police take a dim view of political agitators. When Moorthy advocates spinning and wearing local cloth, a holy man, who supports the British government, denounces him and he is ex-communicated. The resulting humiliation is the death of his mother.

Slowly, however, Moorthy's sincerity does win him a few supporters, especially among those who have nothing to lose from a 'social revolution.' Moorthy himself also grows in maturity and courage, learning when and how to confront the authorities and stand up for his ideals. As Moorthy steps up his campaign, he tries to organise workers on a coffee estate, where he gets involved in a physical clash with the police and is injured. This violence disturbs his equilibrium and, like a true Gandhian, he goes on a fast to purify his mind and seek greater understanding. After the fast, he feels rejuvenated but is then arrested and sent to prison for seditious activity. During his absence, one of his followers, a woman named Rangamma, takes the initiative and sets up a female group of non-violent fighters for freedom.

When Moorthy returns to Kanthapura, he sees that many more people have taken up the cause of independence but that this has also brought more police surveillance and violence. The success of the movement, however, is not just attributable to Moorthy and Rangamma, or even Gandhi. It is largely due to the peaceful and auspicious power of Kenchamma, the goddess, whom the narrator invokes at the beginning of each chapter. But by the end of the book, Kenchamma and the traditional society that she represents, is destroyed. The women of the village burn their houses, reject the goddess and move to a new town, a shift that is symbolic of their new lives.

Themes

Orality The significance of oral tradition is signalled very early in the story by the appearance of Achakka, the Brahmin widow, who actually is the narrator. She, like many people in the village of Kanthapura, is illiterate, yet she possesses a rich storehouse of legends, myths and stories. By telling the story through her, the author is attempting to disguise his own writing. In his Preface, Raja Rao calls the novel a *sthala-purana*, or a local myth. Indeed, throughout the novel, he employs proverbs, folk tales and Hindu myths to create an atmosphere of 'authenticity', which is exactly what both he (Raja Rao) and his protagonist (Moorthy) wish to promote. 'The Indian-ness' of oral culture is also constantly seen in juxtaposition to the foreign nature of writing. The colonial government, and their local allies, use the written word to enforce their control over a largely illiterate society. Written documents are used by the police, landowners and money-lenders in their attempt to suppress the Gandhian movement, which is largely promoted by oral means, including songs, proverbs and even speeches by Gandhi and his associates (including Moorthy). In one dramatic moment, a local form of enacted storytelling, called *harikatha*, is employed. Using traditional characters from Hindu mythology, the *harikatha* performer introduces Gandhism to the villagers of Kanthapura. This contrast, however, is not always black-and-white. For example, Moorthy uses books to understand

Gandhism, and he also establishes a newspaper in order to spread Gandhi's word.

Caste A second theme running through this book, and especially its first half, is the social domination of the caste system. In the early chapters, we are shown how each caste group—from Brahmin to Untouchable—has its own specialised economic niche in the village. We learn how the Brahmins use their privileged status as priests and intellectuals to control people. 'Knowledge is power,' and traditional Indian society placed knowledge in the hands of its Brahmins. Brahmins also have the leverage of religion, invoking sacred rites and ancient conventions, to maintain the status quo in the power structure. Similarly, there are high-caste landowners and middle-caste money-lenders who use their position to their own financial advantage and to perpetuate the established hierarchy. Caste is determined at birth, it is reinforced throughout life, especially by marriage, and cannot be changed. Caste determines whom you can marry, where you can bathe, which well you can draw water from and which hands you can accept food from. In the beginning of the book, Kenchamma, the local goddess, is also seen as part of this entrenched social system. She is the one who, in a local legend known to everyone, defeated ancient enemies and spilt the blood that irrigated the land around the village. She is the bedrock of the system. These are the powerful forces that Moorthy confronts in his attempt to bring equality and dignity to the village. Caste is used to thwart his campaign when the powerful Brahmins threaten to ex-communicate him and convert him to an Untouchable.

Gandhism In the second half of the book, Gandhism prevails. It is set up as the perfect remedy for the caste-ridden society of Kanthapura. The economic inequalities and the psychological injuries, it is believed, will be removed and a society based on common respect and access to public facilities will be instituted. Moorthy himself embodies this Gandhian ideal of caste equality by socialising with Untouchables, drinking their water and eating their food. Moorthy then suggests that everyone, regardless of caste, should spin cotton for clothes-making: this is a traditional craft, but it is revolutionary because everyone will do the same thing. He is able to persuade them because he explains (as Gandhi explained) that spinning is a form of prayer. Gandhism is also cleverly introduced to the villagers through an oral form of storytelling (*harikatha*). In this old-story-made-new a god gives his daughter (Bharata, the traditional word for 'India') to foreign invaders (i.e., the British), but she is recused by Lord Siva, who has taken human form as the Mahatma (the title given to Gandhi). By the conclusion of the story, people are worshipping Gandhi and not the local goddess. Gandhism is victorious. However, it should be pointed out that the historical Gandhi was not himself free of caste prejudice. For example, he did not support Brahmins eating with untouchables. Gandhi sought to reform the caste system not eliminate it.

Characters

Moorthy Moorthy, the protagonist of this social realist novel, is a Brahmin and a university student who gives up his privileged life to become a Gandhian worker in his village.

Ratna Ratna is a young girl who is married at age ten and becomes a widow. She plays a central role in Moorthy's campaign and takes over the movement when he and Rangamma are in prison.

Bade Khan Bade Khan is a Muslim and the local policeman in Kanthapura. He represents the 'arm of the law' and more than once attacks Moorthy's protestors with his *lathi* stick or cudgel.

Rangamma Rangamma is a high-caste woman from a wealthy family in the city who marries into the village. As an educated woman, she becomes Moorthy's second-in-command and takes over the campaign when he is put in prison.

Achakka Achakka is a Brahmin widow who narrates the story. It is her oral storytelling, with colloquialisms, and local lore, that gives the novel its distinctive voice. Although she is at first dismissive of Gandhi's ideals, in the end she joins the women's protest against the authorities.

Moorthy (Dedicated)

Character Moorthy is a young Brahmin man and a university student, who is described as 'quiet, generous, serene and deferential.' In other words, he is passively going through life, until he hears the clarion call of nationalism from Gandhi. Now he becomes a man of action and purpose, rallying

the villagers to fight against both the caste-system and the British colonial government. He has his own internal struggle, too, because although he believes in caste equality, his mind and body have been accustomed to observe inequality. He shows great courage in overcoming his fears and in defying the 'pollution law' when he visits the houses of Untouchables in the village, and he displays a keen strategic mind by choosing to introduce Gandhi's ideas through a performer of a form of local storytelling (*harikatha*). The depth of his commitment to the cause is illustrated when he is ex-communicated (for socialising with Untouchables), and his mother dies of the shame. Although he grieves for her, his energy is channelled into the campaign. His adherence to non-violence is demonstrated when, after violence during clashes with the police, he undergoes a three-day fast in order to purify his mind. His selfless dedication to the cause of social reform wins over the villagers, who begin to worship him as 'our Gandhi.' He is not a blind follower of the Mahatma, however, and in the end we learn (through a letter he has written to Rangamma) that he has split from Gandhi. Gandhi, he says, has become too close to the British (Gandhi went to London and sat around a negotiating table). Now Moorthy believes that Jawaharlal Nehru's more practical economic policies are the remedy for poverty.

Activities Moorthy works endlessly to bring Gandhi's message to Kanthapura. He recruits people by giving speeches, leading rallies and visiting individual houses. He institutes a scheme that enables everyone to spin their own cotton. He also arranges for local storytellers to perform for village audiences and sets up a group who sing religious songs (*bhajans*) with a political message.

Illustrative moments

Uncertain The character of Moorthy is interesting because the author shows that he cannot simply shift from one way of life (traditional, privileged Brahmin) to another (Gandhian reformer) without uncertainty and inner turmoil. This wavering quality is demonstrated in several places but perhaps most poignantly when Moorthy goes to visit the house of an untouchable named Rachanna. When he arrives, Rachanna is out and his wife invites Moorthy inside, saying, 'Come in and sit by me, since you are now one of us [he has been ex-communicated]. The sun is hot outside.' But Moorthy has never entered an Untouchable's house; he'd always stood on the threshold. The author describes his uncertainty this way: 'He stood trembling and undecided,' as if he is literally stepping into the unknown. He quickly crosses the threshold and sits down on the dirt floor. He has made the decision, he has been true to his ideals. Yet, even then, he recoils because he smells the 'stench of slaughtered pigs' [only Untouchables are allowed to touch the polluting substance of dead animals]. He is offered a glass of milk by the Untouchable woman and he does drink, but only a tiny sip. It is these small details of Moorthy's inner struggle that make us sympathetic to him.

Courageous Once that line had been crossed, it seems that Moorthy has been released from his old life and is able to fully embrace his new one. He shows great courage when he confronts the authorities in several episodes, but none so dramatically as when he tries to force his way into a coffee estate. He wants to organise the low-caste workers there. Although they are not Untouchables, they are 'coolies' or daily labourers, who come from various low castes. When they go on strike and demand better working conditions, Moorthy leads a group of men and women from the village to the estate to support them. Their way into the estate is blocked by the police, but Moorthy demands that they be allowed to proceed. 'Stitch up your mouth, you dog,' says the local policeman. And Moorthy replies, 'I am a free man, sir, and I shall say and do what is right and within the law.' The policeman says he cannot enter and mix with the coolies. 'Coolies are men, too, and by the laws of our own government and of Mr Skeffington [the estate owner], no man can own another. I will go and I will speak to them.' Here we see that Moorthy, like his mentor Gandhi, is not only courageous in facing up to authority but also well-informed about the law. Moorthy, and Gandhi's campaign, were successful in part because they could use the law to justify their actions.

Pragmatic Moorthy is an idealist but also a pragmatist. This attitude is another Gandhian one, since the Mahatma championed simple means of self-sufficiency, such as spinning one's own cotton and making one's own salt. And it is this same pragmatism that forces Moorthy to make an abrupt shift in the final pages of the novel. Having spent months in prison, he has come to the conclusion that Gandhi is naïve. A saint, perhaps, but too easily duped by the British. Moorthy explains all this in a long letter, in which he makes the telling point that independence cannot be the only goal because even in the independent princely states [many states were not directly ruled by the British], there is still poverty and caste inequality. In other words, Moorthy realises that even after the British leave,

there will be severe problems. And that is why he has decided to support Nehru, who was a more secular, modern leader, with specific plans for industrialisation, as opposed to Gandhi's naïve vision of a 'rural republic.' It through the character of Moorthy, one of the most complex Gandhians of Indian fiction, that we can appreciate the complexities of the nationalist movement in India.

Ratna (Optimistic)

Character Ratna is a girl of ten when she is married and, shortly thereafter, widowed. She is then ostracised by the village, and even by her own mother, because she is no longer a virgin but cannot marry again. As a sexually active woman who cannot marry, she is dangerous and must be avoided. Ratna is a compassionate person who begins to understand Moorthy's message of equality, and she becomes close to him and cares for him while he goes on a fast. She learns how to read and is able to teach other women about religious texts. She also becomes active in Moorthy's campaign, joins with others in political protests and is almost raped by a policeman. She develops into a mature, independent person and is capable of taking over the leadership of the campaign after both Moorthy and Rangamma are put in prison. At the end of the book, she moves away from Kanthapura and settles in Bombay. As a child-bride, who is widowed and yet becomes active in politics, and who then leaves her village and goes to the big city, Ratna represents the future India.

Activities When we first meet Ratna, she is already a widow. Although pushed to the margins of society, she remains in public view, washing her clothes in the river and drawing water from the common well (for caste Hindus, not Untouchables). She is not politicised until later when she cares for the fasting Moorthy. She also performs traditional rituals and prays every morning to Kenchamma, the village goddess. Later, after she joins Moorthy's movement, she sings devotional-nationalist songs, goes on protest marches and organises events on her own. One of her most significant activities is that she gathers the illiterate women of the village together for a sort of 'book club', in which she reads them religious texts and then explains how they are relevant to the nationalist movement.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive When Moorthy has undertaken his fast, Ratna is the one who goes to him to make sure he is taken care of. Although she is only fifteen years old at that point, she shows the maturity of an older woman. She speaks softly, asking, 'Is there anything I can do?' Moorthy says that she should pray with him so that the sins of others [who had committed violence during a protest march] should be purified. Ratna barely grasps what he is saying, but she is moved by the serenity of his voice and the restfulness of his demeanour. She is capable of responding to these subtle signs because she has suffered herself great pain and deprivation as a young widow.

Decisive Ratna goes through a baptism of fire in this novel, enduring the experiences of a child-bride, a widow, a political activist and then the leader of the women's movement in the village. Along the way, she gains insight and makes key decisions. One of the most important decision comes on a day when violence breaks out in Kanthapura. The police have rounded up the striking workers on the coffee estate and march them through the village, like cattle, to show the Gandhi followers who holds the whip hand. Everyone gathers to watch in horror as the police use sticks to beat the men onward. Eventually, Ratna can bear it no longer and begins to shout abuse at the policemen, who then break away and start to run after the women. Some of them are raped, and Ratna herself is only saved from rape by a last-minute intervention by her 'sisters,' as she calls the other women volunteers. Now, Ratna again seizes the initiative and leads the women to the safety of the temple. But even then she does not rest and risks being captured a second time by slipping across the village in order to collect blankets and water for the women hiding in the temple. It is a chaotic few hours, filled with violence and horror, but Ratna's quick-witted thinking brings it to a victorious conclusion.

Optimistic Throughout the long year of the novel, when the campaign suffers blow after blow, when first Moorthy and then Rangamma are arrested, Ratna never gives up hope. In the closing pages, she leads a procession of Gandhi followers through the village, which is a kind of reverse of the earlier scene of policemen marching the coolies along the same route. Blowing a conch shell, she

leads the women in singing a song ('Vande Mataram,' 'Hail, mother [India]'), which has become the anthem of the nationalists. Then she herself is arrested and spends a year in prison. When she comes out, the people of Kanthapura expect her to be broken and despondent. They have heard of the terrible beatings and deprivations she has suffered. But she returns to them full of hope. When property developers take over Kanthapura, she hatches a plan to take her core supporters to Bombay. It is from there, she tells them, that she and her 'sisters' can best fight for freedom.

Rangamma (Brave)

Character Rangamma is from a wealthy, high-caste and city-based family. She lives in Kanthapura only because that is the home of her equally rich husband, who then dies. Rangamma may now be a widow, who is expected to live a life of obscurity, but she is an educated and independent-minded person. When Moorthy arrives with his new ideas, she becomes the first recruit, and her large, comfortable house is turned into a headquarters for the campaign. She is a sort of female-counterpart to Moorthy, not only in political campaigning but also in the fact that she, as a high-caste person, struggles to free herself from traditional prejudices. She, also like Moorthy, however, is dedicated and takes over leadership of the campaign when he goes to prison. She is also imprisoned for her 'seditious' activities, which include the publishing of a pro-Independence newspaper. Her most significant contribution to the movement is the establishment of a women's volunteer corps, which mirrors the historical fact that women joined the Congress (Gandhi's party) in large numbers and proved themselves effective recruiters by winning over large numbers of people, especially other women and traditional villagers all over India. Rangamma is thus a powerful symbol. She is a widow but she becomes a public leader. She is an educated, urban woman who lends her talents to a movement that had to win over the vast rural population.

Activities Rangamma is an industrious Gandhian supporter. She organises a women's group; she sets up and publishes a newspaper; she leads traditional singing sessions; she gives discourses on how Hinduism and Gandhism are essentially the same; and she leads protest marches. For all of this she is arrested and put in prison, where she remains as the book ends.

Illustrative moments

Traditional Although Rangamma becomes a dedicated follower of Moorthy and Gandhi, she is still a traditional Hindu who cannot simply toss away the attitudes she was brought up with. A vivid illustration of the lingering power of these prejudices occurs when Moorthy comes to her house after he has entered an Untouchable's house (for the first time). Rangamma greets him at her front door, but when she learns where he has been, she says softly, 'Just come to the back door.' Then she suggests that he take a bath and replace his now-polluted sacred thread with a new one. Finally, she gives him a little glass of holy Ganges water to purify his insides. 'After all,' she declares, 'a brahmin is a brahmin.' Now that her own house will not be polluted by someone who has been in touch with pollution, Rangamma can get down to business with Moorthy and plot their next move to end caste inequality in the village. Although she appears to be a hypocrite, we (and the author) do not judge her harshly because her dedication to the cause is sincere. Instead, we appreciate the distance she must travel in order to reach a position of supporting change.

Brave Rangamma shows bravery in several scenes in the novel, often when facing the police and their lathi sticks. In a sense, it can be easier to display courage against one's obvious enemies (the colonial authorities) than against one's own people, but that is what Rangamma does. She is a widow, expected to live out her days in prayer and domestic chores, without showing herself in public. Rangamma defies these expectations in many ways, but most visibly when she goes to the city and lives with Sankar, a lawyer. Because Moorthy has been put in prison and she does not feel safe in the village, she shifts to Sankar's house. Now tongues wag, condemning her for such wanton behaviour. 'They spat on the ground in front of Sankar's house, saying she had this man and that man.' Rangamma's reaction is simply to think, 'Let them say what they want. I can't stop them. I have work to do.' Standing up to the brutal force of a police charge is one thing—and she does that, too—but it is remaining steadfast in the face of insults from one's own people that defines her bravery.

Intelligent The other quality that defines Rangamma's character is her intelligence, her knowledge of Hindu ritual texts and her ability to explain them. This ability, which was essential in convincing

villagers that Gandhi's message was acceptable, is shown in a central episode in the novel. Moorthy is in prison, the temple priest has died and there is no one to give the weekly discourse on a religious topic. Rangamma steps into the breach and delivers an articulate explication of certain aspects of Hindu philosophy that impresses everyone. This is key to the story because it then allows Rangamma to recruit the village women and form a volunteer force. Without intelligent and brave women, the novel shows us, Gandhi's movement would have remained limited to urban men.