

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## RAJA RAO

**Born** 1908 Hassan, Mysore, India

**Died** 2006 Austin, Texas, USA

### Biography

Raja Rao, one of the seminal Indian writers of the mid-twentieth century, was born in a Brahmin family in a small town in what was then the princely state of Mysore and is now the state of Karnataka. He was one of nine children born to a father who taught Kannada literature (the regional language) at a college in Hyderabad and to a mother who died when Raja Rao was only four. This loss had a major impact on the young boy and later writer. During his youth, he showed an interest in other cultures, enrolling in a Muslim madrasa and studying French on his own. Another influence in these early years was the famed writer Ahmad Ali. Having received his BA from the University of Madras, the big shift in his life came when he won a scholarship from the Hyderabad government (then a Princely state ruled by a Muslim family) to study in France. Rao spent the early 1930s studying at Montpellier and the Sorbonne. While in Montpellier he met and married a French woman, Camille Mouly, although the marriage broke up in 1939. By then, he had become active in Gandhi's independence movement and played a significant role in setting up cultural organisations and publications that promoted traditional Indian values. That activity and idealism is reflected in his first, and probably his best, novel, *Kanthapura*, which was published in 1938. Rao's political activism was soon subsumed by his deeper interest in spiritual philosophy, which was firmly established when he met his guru in 1943. Thereafter, his life and writing were dedicated to understanding and explaining the non-dualism (*advaita*) view of reality. Rao continued to publish short stories and essays on Indian philosophy but did not publish another novel until the metaphysical exploration in *The Serpent and the Rope* in 1960. This was followed in 1965 by *The Cat and Shakespeare*, which continued in the abstract philosophical vein established with the previous novel.

The next and last phase of his life came in the mid-1960s when he became a professor of Indian Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, which had begun to expand its curriculum in Asian Studies. Although he published two more novels, neither is considered even close to the standard set by his first two. However, the short stories written while in Texas continued to display his literary talents. For twenty years at the university, he taught a variety of philosophy courses (from Marxism to Gandhi to Buddhism) and published well-received academic studies on the same topics. In 1965, he married Catherine Jones, an American theatre actress, and they had a son but divorced after a few years. In 1986, at the age of 78, Rao married Susan Vaught, a former student.

### Achievements

Rao was accorded the Padma Bhushan in 1969, an honour given by the Indian government for outstanding achievements in the arts, culture and science. He received the Padma Vibhushan (the next highest honour) posthumously in 2007. The Neustadt Prize for international literature was given to him in 1988.

### List of Fiction Works

#### Novels

*Kanthapura* (1938)  
*The Serpent and the Rope* (1960)  
*The Cat and Shakespeare: A Tale of India* (1965)  
*Comrade Kirillov* (1976)  
*The Chessmaster and His Moves* (1988)

Short story collections

*The Cow of the Barricades* (1947)  
*The Policeman and the Rose* (1978)  
*On the Ganga Ghat* (1989)