

<b>Regional fiction:</b>	Fiction about a particular geographical region.
<b>Provincialism:</b>	Manners peculiar to an area.
<b>Dostoevsky:</b>	Russian novelist, author of <i>Brothers Karamzov</i> .
<b>Gorky:</b>	Russian novelist, author of <i>Mother</i> .
<b>Malraux:</b>	French novelist.
<b>Kafka:</b>	Jewish writer born in Prague, author of <i>The Trial</i> .
<b>Rilke:</b>	German poet, a great stylist.
<b>Andre Gide:</b>	French novelist, dramatist and poet.

## Career and Works

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### 1.9 QUESTIONS

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1. Place Raja Rao in the context of the evolution of the Indian writing in English.
2. Compare and contrast Raja Rao's contribution as a writer to that of two of his major contemporaries, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan.
3. Write a short essay on the literary influences that shaped Raja Rao's philosophy of life and literature.

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## UNIT 2 *KANTHAPURA* : BACKGROUND

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Historical and Political Background
- 2.3 Gandhian Thought and Its Impact
- 2.4 Raja Rao's English : Form and Style
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 References
- 2.7 Glossary
- 2.8 Questions

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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The main objective of this Unit is to give you some background knowledge about *Kanthapura*. When you finish a careful reading of this Unit, you would have gathered information about the following topics :

- the sources of *Kanthapura*;
- the historical and political background of the novel;
- the impact of Gandhian philosophy on Raja Rao as presented in this novel;
- the form and style of English as a medium evolved by Raja Rao for narrating the events that form the plot of *Kanthapura*.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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While studying Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* as a text, one needs to have a background knowledge of several things. For instance, you, as a student, ought to know about the sources — ancient and modern — that inspired the author to write this book. The theme, structure, characterization, language and style of a novel are generally determined by the models that the writer has in mind and of which he is constantly thinking while writing the book. Hence, it makes the task of understanding a text easy if one has a fair knowledge of its sources. Similarly, since *Kanthapura* is a social document about a village in turmoil and the people living in it, you need to know about the historical time and the political movement that are shown to have caused the upheaval. Mahatma Gandhi is a living presence in *Kanthapura*, and his philosophy of life and political struggle is reflected by the thought and action of several characters. All this must be taken into account while proceeding with the study of the novel. There is yet another aspect of the book — its language and style — which you need to know so that you are able to appreciate the peculiarities of expression that you will come across when reading the novel. All these various elements of background study form part of this Unit.

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### 2.2 SOURCES OF *KANTHAPURA*

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In language and style that recall ancient Indian epics, Raja Rao describes in *Kanthapura* an archetypal South Indian village inspired by Gandhi's *Satyagraha* and

crushed by the police force of the British rulers. The Skeffington Coffee Estate and what goes on within its boundaries represents the pattern of British oppression in India. In spite of its social realistic mode, the novel evolves round its mythic and symbolic framework. Rao writes a narrative that not only takes us back to the world of the Hindu epics, but also interprets experience in the forms of Hindu thought. Events of the plot are illusory; life is symbolic; and the struggle of the men and women of *Kanthapura* village is part of the continuing *Ramayana*. Gandhi is an *Avatara* (incarnation) of Rama sent from heaven to rescue India (Sita) from the British (Ravana). The old and the new orders are mingled together. Non-violence of *Satyagraha* is integrated with the ancient, violent tradition of the Indian epics, which repeats itself hundreds of times over in the course of Indian history.



Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

Rao builds up an image of India that appeals to the West without sacrificing realism. Ancient history, religion, characters from the epics, natural landscape, and ordinary life of the village community of *Kanthapura* – all these elements are synthesised to raise the message of the novel above mere nationalism. The life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi provide constant refrains to hold the characters and various strands of the plot of *Kanthapura* together. Gandhi's moral values and practice in politics, Moorthy's socialistic ideas, the mythology of the man who tells the *Harikatha* (story of God), the personal likes and dislikes of the narrator, the ruthlessness of the oppressors – all these various elements of the novel offer interpretations of the place of nationalism and of good and evil in Indian life. No single view is allowed to dominate the novel. *Kanthapura* symbolises India, its capacity to absorb influences and yet remain essentially the same.

In the process of writing *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao was aware of the problem of expressing purely Indian experience through the medium of the novel of European origin. As a consequence, he does not strictly adhere to the Western model, but makes it suit his purpose by mixing into it the purely Indian elements of the epic, *Purana*, and *Harikatha*. In the process, he succeeds in his endeavour of achieving a fusion of theme, form and discourse, which are authentically Indian and modern at the same time. *Kanthapura* is a novel that has the freedom of the romance, the broad canvas of the epic, and symbolism of the fable. It is history and fictional narrative

unified to form a prose poem. Its historical action covers nearly ten years of Indian struggle for freedom, including Gandhi's famous Dandi March during the Salt Satyagraha and the Civil Disobedience Movement. As a *Purana*, it recalls the legendary exploits of Rama and Krishna, which are known to most Indians from their very childhood. Through the skill of his art, Raja Rao integrates broad Indian experience and Gandhian philosophy into the destiny of the village community of *Kanthapura*. As K.R. Rao writes in his book, *The Fiction of Raja Rao* :

*Kanthapura* does not project the Indian spirit isolatively, but as a living experience moving in time and space. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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### 2.3 HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

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The actual historical and political situation of India in the 1930's provides the background of the story that is narrated in *Kanthapura*. The Indian National Congress Committee was already a broad-based political organization that had spread its branches in the length and breadth of India. Mahatma Gandhi, after his return from South Africa, was already recognized as a leader of national stature who had launched his revolutionary campaign based on *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha* against the British rule. There are recurring references in the novel to important political events of that time, such as the Salt Satyagraha, the Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi, the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Round Table Conference, and the Gandhi - Irwin Pact. Whatever was happening on the political scene in India in those years finds its due reflection in the novel. Characters like Moorthy, Rangamma, Ratna and Range Gowda are not only aware of what is happening all over India, but they also take an active part in the rebellion against the British rulers. They subscribe to newspapers, which are read in communal gatherings, and thus the villagers of *Kanthapura* come to know about the great freedom struggle that was at its peak then in the length and breadth of the country.

The enthusiasm of the people truly reflects the actual mood of the nation. To defy the British symbol of oppression, the villagers go out on a protest march towards the Skeffington Coffee Estate to picket the country liquor shop (toddy shop) near it. The following passage, quoted from the Orient Paperbacks edition (1971) of *Kanthapura* tells us how the people of the surrounding areas supported the march. Subsequent references to the text will be from the same edition.

And we march on and on, winding up the Karwar Road to the Kenchamma grove, and at every step there are corn - people and puffed - rice and Bengal gram people and bangle sellers and buttermilk people and betel-leaf people, and they stop us and say, 'Take this, take this, Mahatma's men !' (193)

There is an oblique reference to the Round Table Conference in London, when they say that the Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country (England) to get them *Swaraj* or self-rule.

The action of *Kanthapura* dates back to the time when the Gandhian ideas fired the imagination of the Indian nation and paved the way for a non-violent revolution against the British rule. Whatever happens at *Kanthapura* was happening everywhere in India. This is equally true of the ruthless handling of the situation by the Red-man's police force. Bade Khan is a typical police officer in the service of the British

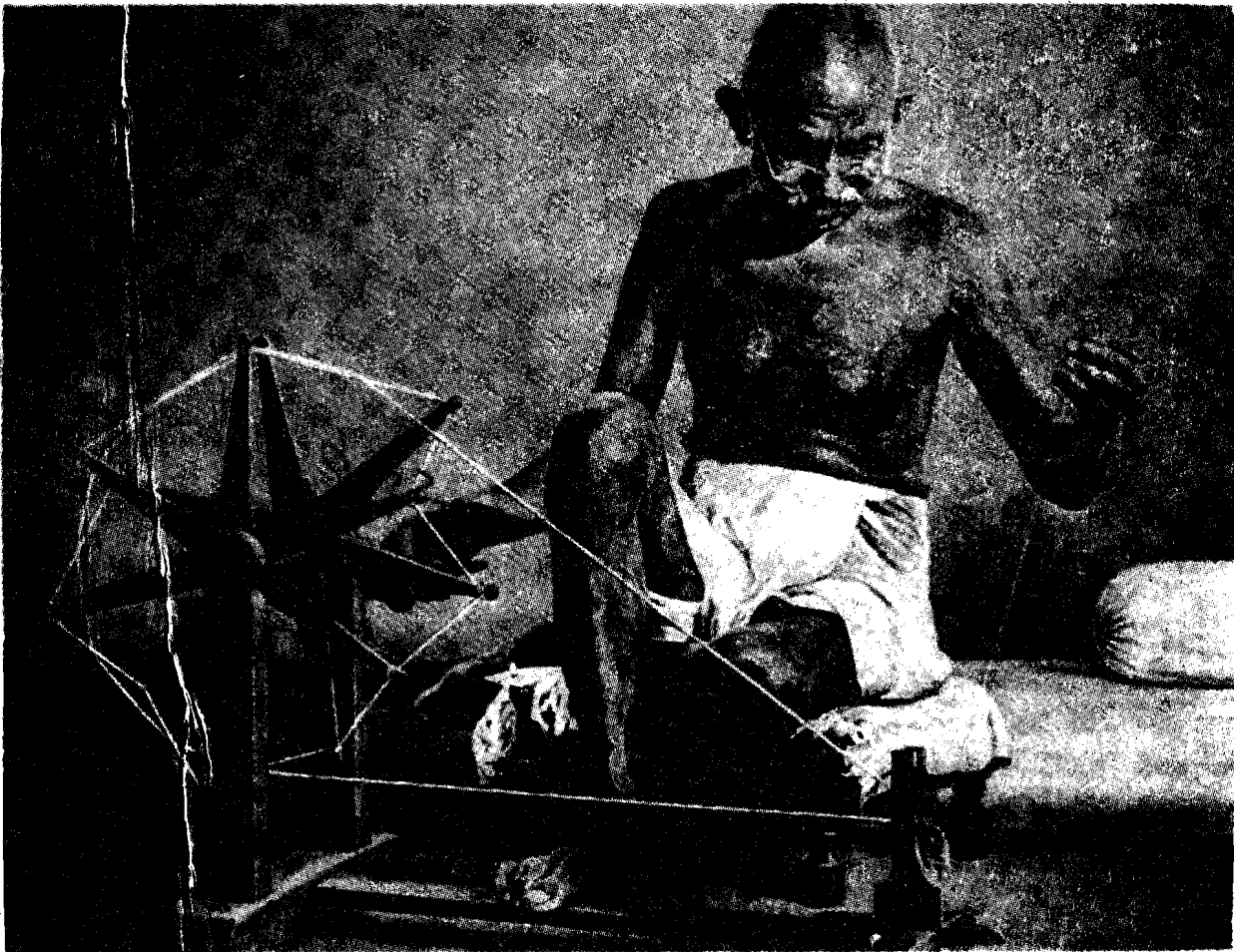
government. He strictly follows the orders of his masters to suppress the popular uprising in the village and its surroundings at any cost. His men shower lathis on the gatherings of the villagers and trample them under their heavy boots. They do not let go of any opportunity to molest their women: There is no exaggeration in Raja Rao's description of such happenings as things were the same all over India during the freedom movement. To counter the police brutalities, Moorthy advises his followers to take recourse to passive resistance in response to a call from Gandhi, but it does not achieve the objective of putting the oppressors to shame. It is an unequal fight, and the main leaders of the village are arrested and jailed. The villagers wait in suspense for them to return and resume their leadership of the movement against the Red-man's rule. K.R. Rao sums up the situation in these words :

Moorthy's release renews the dedication and enthusiasm of the community. The villagers launch on the 'Don't - touch - the Government campaign', which is succeeded by the 'no tax campaign' and other forms of Civil Disobedience ... But it proves an unequal fight and the satyagrahis are mercilessly put down, and all ends in a terrible fiasco. Yet the valiant struggle attains the dimensions of a heroic myth. Kanthpura is 'destroyed, but not defeated'<sup>2</sup>

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#### 4 GANDHIAN THOUGHT AND ITS IMPACT

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Mahatma Gandhi does not figure in *Kanthapura* as a character, but his invisible presence and the wide impact of his thought is felt throughout the book. Gandhian philosophy is introduced into the novel through Moorthy, the main protagonist, who comes under the influence of Gandhi at a young age. Moorthy regards Gandhi as a role model, and follows him in every way, in word and deed. He preaches to the villagers the chief tenets of Gandhian philosophy such as to practice *ahimsa* and speak the truth. He also persuades them to make cotton yarn on the spinning wheel and to wear cloth spun and woven by their own hands. British made foreign clothes are to be discarded and destroyed in bonfires. Moorthy tells his village followers that Gandhi says, 'Spinning is as purifying as praying'. This creates the image of Gandhi as a Mahatma, a great soul and a deeply religious man, whom they venerate and whose words they follow as the law. To them, he is a mighty godly figure who emanates spiritual power that is going to overthrow the British rule in India.

The people of *Kanthapura* and the adjoining areas are exhorted in the name of the Mahatma not to drink toddy or liquor in any form. The toddy shops in the neighbourhood are picketed to prevent sale of liquor. Gandhi's practice of singing *Bhajans* (hymns) at his prayer meetings is generally appreciated. The people take out *prabhat pheries* (morning outings), getting up at dawn, gathering at the temple, and going through the streets in the twilight, singing religious songs. They also sing new songs in which Gandhi's image appears as that of a king of humble origin. Here is an example :

Our King, he was born on a wattle - mat,  
He's not the King of the velvet bed,  
He's small and he's round and he's bright and he is sacred,  
O, Mahatma, you're our king and we are your slaves. (203)

And, again :

There's one Government, sister,  
There's one Government, sister,  
And that's the Government of the Mahatma. (207)

The villagers proudly declare that they are all for Gandhi; they are Gandhi's men and will do anything at his command. On several occasions in the novel, thundering slogans are raised to the skies; 'Vande Mataram !' 'Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai !' and 'Inquilab Zindabad !' They invest Gandhi with super-human powers. But there is one thing about Gandhi's teachings that the people of *Kanthapura* do not understand. Why should he advise the upper caste Hindus to mingle with the lower caste Pariahs - to live with them, to eat with them, and to inter-marry with them. They find such behaviour so un-Mahatma like. Some of them like Bhatta and Venkamma repeatedly belittle Moorthy in the eyes of the others for his association with the pariahs of the village. When Moorthy tells Renge Gowda, one of his ardent followers, that Gandhi wants people to pluck out hatred from their hearts and love even their enemies, Gowda replies, 'That's for the Mahatma and you Moorthappa - not for us poor folk !' The idea is that Gandhi and Moorthy have attained such an ideal height where they can practise whatever they preach but the lesser people cannot forget their simple enmities.

Gandhi believed in simple living, and all his life tried to live the life of the ordinary people. But an impressive image of Gandhi is projected in *Kanthapura*, when he is spoken of in the same breath as some of the gods of the Hindu Pantheon. Jayaramachar, the *Harikatha* man comes to Kanthapura and tells a new kind of tale in which he mingles Hindu mythology with contemporary politics. He compares Gandhi to Lord Siva when he says, Siva is the three - eyed, and Swaraj too is three - eyed : Self - purification, Hindu - Muslim unity, Khaddar.' Mohan being one of the names of Krishna, Gandhi's full name, Mohandas Karamchand , gives Jayaramachar the

idea of paralleling his achievement to that of Krishna. Just as the god as a young boy slays the serpent Kali, we are told that Gandhi goes from village to village slaying the serpent of foreign rule. Again, just as Krishna teaches Arjuna the wisdom of how to be a true man of action. Gandhi teaches Moorthy how to be a true satyagrahi. Since Gandhi interpreted self-rule as an ideal form of government in the manner of *Rama - rajya*, the Gandhi myth is finally expressed in these terms in *Kanthapura* :

They say Mahatma will go to the Red-man's country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravna will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. (257)

On the fair carts of *Kanthapura*, the pictures of Rama, Krishna, Sankra and Gandhi are placed side by side.

Summing up his views on '*Kanthapura* and Gandhism,' P. Dayal writes in *Raja Rao : A Study of His Novels*,

*Kanthapura* remains primarily a novel about the Freedom Movement. It propounds the political beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi, as Gandhism forms the basis of the book. The novel expounds the Gandhian values on non-violence and abolition of untouchability. The tremendous religious activity, the mythicising 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. The references to the *Karma* philosophy, the omnipresence of God, the immortality of soul and the doctrine of incarnation which are derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* signify the novelist's fascination for Vedanta.<sup>3</sup>

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## 2.5 RAJA RAO'S ENGLISH : FORM AND STYLE OF *KANTHAPURA*

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Raja Rao's 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura* contains significant comments on his literary style and diction. It shows that he uses these in a cautious, tolerant manner as instruments that mediate between the emotional quality of the Indian experience and its expression in English in intellectual terms. He says :

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language... English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians, We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. (5)

Rao's style in *Kanthapura* is so unconventional because he has attempted to introduce into English the speech rhythms of his own mother tongue, Kannada. His is not the English of the educated and sophisticated Indians; it is the natural speech of the South Indian villagers rendered into simple English. Summing up the effect, Srinivasa Iyengar writes :

... it is as though one sees a familiar landscape through coloured glasses. The colouring, the strangeness, is unavoidable, but it does not alter the essential truth of the things seen or the movements observed.<sup>4</sup>

Rao's objective in choosing English as his medium is to find in a foreign language the stylistic equivalent of the Indian experience. In other words, he has tried to express through English his understanding of the Indian life.

Raja Rao dissociates the English language from those elements which identify it with purely Western experience and culture. There is a profusion of 'local colour' in the speech of his characters in *Kanthapura*. It is a deliberate distancing effort to make the language shed its European connotations, and so to transform it into what is generally known as 'Indian English'. Rao borrows extensively from Kannada to replace the English idiom and proverbs that he discards. For instance, he writes 'a crow-and-sparrow story' instead of 'a cock-and-bull tale', and replaces the English 'nip in the bud' by the Kannada 'crush it in its seed.' When the poor untouchables of *Kanthapura* get their free spinning wheels from Moorthy, 'they go back with their spinning wheels upon their shoulders, their mouths touching the ears with delight.' (33) This is another example of Raja Rao using non-English forms of expression. Elaborating on this theme, Esha Dey writes in *The Novels of Raja Rao* :

Then there is a sprinkling of words connected with the physical reality of India and Hindu behaviour patterns, like *pollution, caste, coconut, camphor, lantana, bamboo, ablution, banana puffed-rice*, etc. in short the items which 'Indianize' the language essentially for their semantic function in respect of Hindu/Indian culture. But linguistic patterns remain the same, in the effort to present reality as actually perceived by the senses.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of Rao's synthesis of theme and style, Makarand Paranjape comments:

Both stylistically and thematically ... Rao succeeds in capturing the spirit of India in his works. His innovations with form and style have expanded the expressive range of English and have influenced other writers who share his predicament: the task of writing about a culture in a language that is not native to it.<sup>6</sup>

There is a poetic quality in Raja Rao's prose in *Kanthapura*, and this is especially noticed in his descriptions. He gives lists of sonorous South Indian names, indulges in repetitions, and strings together a number of clauses to build a rhythmic effect that sounds almost like verse. This is noticed in the opening pages of the novel where the author leads the reader up the winding road of the Ghats to the *Kanthapura* village. The same touch is again noticed in Rao's narration of how Goddess Kenchamma fights a demon to save the people from his attacks. As he says in the 'Foreward', *Kanthapura* is written as a *sthala-purana* (the exclusive mythic tale of a particular



place), its language has the tone and quality of an epic. This is particularly true of the story of Mahatma. And then, the description of the Kartik Festival of Lights is an excellent piece of rhythmic prose :

## Background

Kartik has come to *Kanthapura*... with the glow of lights and unpresed footsteps of the wandering gods; white lights from clay-trays and red lights from copper-stands, and diamond lights that glow from the bowers of entrance-leaves; lights that glow from banana trunks and mango twigs, yellow lights behind white leaves, and green lights behind yellow leaves, and white lights behind green leaves; ... (118)

In this passage, there is a peculiar rhythm which is part of the magical scene that is vividly and imaginatively described by Rao. The reader feels himself inexorably drawn towards the fireworks of colours and lights created by the skilful use of suggestive words and images. The scene recalls many memories of the Diwali celebrations in the month of Kartik.

Raja Rao's prose style in *Kanthapura* has an orientation towards oral speech, and that is only natural since the story is told by a narrator who has a socially distinct manner of telling a tale. Achakka, a grandmother of the village, humble of origin but rich in experience, has a memory full of folk-lore and traditional myth. She uses these assets to enrich the narrative. Rao decorates her descriptions with repetitive phrases and sentences that are full of sound-effects in alliteration and assonance. This adds to the distinctive quality of his language and style. Raja Rao's skilful use of long sentences complements his descriptive power which he achieves through animated and rhythmic English prose. S.C. Harrex describes the overall effect in apt words as follows:

Considered in terms of the development of the Indian novel in English, *Kanthapura* clearly has a special place as the first work to demonstrate convincingly, in terms of form and content, that the novel in English was a medium which could be adapted to the Indian sensibility.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the similarity between Raja Rao's style in *Kanthapura* and that of the ancient Indian Purans, Paranjape writes:

*Kanthapura* shares certain narrative techniques with the Puranas. The story is told rapidly, all in one breath, by a village grandmother and the style reflects the oral heritage also evident in the Harikatha... The Puranas contain detailed, poetic descriptions of nature; similarly, the novel has several descriptive passages which are so evocative and unified as to be prose-poems themselves. Examples are the coming of Karthic, daybreak over the Ghats and the advent of the rains.<sup>8</sup>

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## 2.6 LET US SUM UP

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Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is about life in a South Indian village, but its central theme is the Gandhian Satyagraha Movement against the British rule in India. The author introduces parallels to characters and events drawn from the *Ramayana*. Mahatma Gandhi's story is told in the form of a *Harikatha* by Jayaramachar. The novel is projected as a *sithala - purana*, i.e., the mythic tale of a particular place. The three

levels of action - political, social and religious - present a unified concept of India. The action belongs to the decade of the 1930's when the Indian National Congress Committee spread the Gandhian message of Satyagraha and *ahimsa* through the length and breadth of India. The villagers of *Kanthapura* also follow these principles. They take out protest marches towards the Skeffington Coffee Estate and suffer harsh treatment at the hands of the police. Their leader, Moorthy, launches the Civil Disobedience Movement against the British. Gandhi does not figure as a character in the novel, but the various aspects of his philosophy and teachings are projected as the story unfolds. He is compared to the gods, Siva and Krishna, for destroying the demon of foreign rule.

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao conveys a purely Indian experience through the foreign medium of the English language. He uses his style and diction as instruments that achieve a balance between the emotional quality of the Indian experience and its expression in intellectual terms. He introduces into English the speech rhythms of Kannada. Instead of English proverbs, he employs Indian proverbs translated into English. The Indian rhythm of his prose lends it a poetic quality. His descriptions are rich in colour and imagery. Alliteration and repetition add to the flow of his narration.

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## 2.7 REFERENCES

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7. Harrex S.C. *The Fire and the Offering: The English Language Novels of India 1935-1970*, Vol. II. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1978. p.159.
8. Paranjape Makarand. *The Best of Raja Rao*, p. vii-viii.

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## 2.8 GLOSSARY

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<b>Discourse:</b>	Expression, speech
<b>Ahimsa:</b>	A Sanskrit word meaning ' non-violence'
<b>Toddy:</b>	A kind of country liquor popular in South India
<b>Picketed:</b>	Placed men on watch to prevent customers from buying
<b>Pariah:</b>	One of low caste, untouchable
<b>Pantheon:</b>	All the gods collectively
<b>Harikatha:</b>	A story of some god or goddess told with the accompaniment of music and dance
<b>Ghats:</b>	The north - south mountain ranges along the eastern and western coasts of South India
<b>Alliteration:</b>	Repetition of the same initial sound in words
<b>Assonance:</b>	Recurrence of vowel sounds

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## 2.9 QUESTIONS

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Background

1. Write a short essay on the sources of *Kanthapura*.
2. What do you know about the historical and political background of *Kanthapura*?
3. How deep and wide is the impact of Gandhi's personality and his thought on the theme of *Kanthapura*?
4. How does Raja Rao convey in *Kanthapura* the spirit of Indian life through a foreign medium?

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## UNIT 3 *KANTHAPURA* : THEMES

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Village
- 3.3 The Skeffington Coffee Estate
- 3.4 Consideration of Caste
- 3.5 Moorthy Leads a Satyagraha
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Questions

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this Unit is to give you an overall view of :

- *Kanthapura* village and its surroundings.
- The happenings at the Skeffington Coffee Estate.
- The caste system and its influence on the villagers.
- How Moorthy leads the satyagraha in his village.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit, we give you a brief account of *Kanthapura* and the village community that lives there. The chief landmarks around the village and some of the main characters are also mentioned. We tell you about how Moorthy spreads the message of Gandhi in the village. There follows an account of how the Skeffington Coffee Estate was formed and the happenings there at the time of the action of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. A section of the Unit is devoted to explaining the distinctions of caste and how these influence the thinking of the villagers. Finally, we tell you briefly about the satyagraha movement in the village as this theme will be referred to again and again in the Units.

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### 3.2 THE VILLAGE

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*Kanthapura*, as described in Raja Rao's novel, is a village in the province of Kara in the former princely state of Mysore, which is now part of Karnataka. Far above the port city of Mangalore, it is high on the Western Ghats, up the steep mountains that face the Arabian Sea. In the lands around the village are grown coffee, cardamom, rice and sugarcane. While crops of coffee and cardamom are shipped to England, rice and sugar are consumed at home. The nearby forests are full of teak, sal and sandal trees. *Kanthapura* is situated on the road that connects the sea-coast with the interior. Day and night long caravans of bullock carts can be seen on the road carrying the produce of the land. The carts of two village traders, Rama Chetty and Shubba Chetty, are also seen carrying the merchandise on the winding road.