

A TALISMAN FOR MALADIES

The entire village is waiting for fun and feasting at Moorthy's wedding. An amiable young man pursuing a degree at the university in the city, Moorthy is the inheritor of large chunks of land – both wet and dry. Like his widowed mother, everybody in Kanthapura looks forward to the day when Moorthy, almost certain to be a sub-collector – an Indian cannot be the magistrate under the British rule – will marry a petite girl of his mother's choice, setting off the spell of festivities – food, music, fireworks, lights. Almost everyone who has a daughter of marriageable age has pleaded with Moorthy's mother to choose the bride from their home. Moorthy is the best they can hope for.

Then the young man comes home one day, not with a degree, not with the prospects of a smooth future, but ideas of subversion – khadi, Gandhian ideology and a resolve to end Untouchability. He starts moving into the village's 'pariah' quarters, risking his Brahmanical purity, provoking the custodians of his own caste. His mother – always cajoled and pampered by the other women – is now being insulted and threatened by the others for her son's rebellion.

Alarmed by the new radical wave raised by Moorthy and his followers, the Swami – the community's religious figurehead and the very symbol of orthodoxy – ostracizes him. First, Moorthy was 'one of these Gandhi-men, who say there is neither caste nor clan nor family, and yet they pray like us and they live like us.' Striking back at such new ideas, the conservatives now announce him an *untouchable* in the village. He can no longer attend a community meal, ceremonies or rituals. Moorthy – a new *pariah*. The status quoist forces in Kanthapura lack the foresight to see the distant thunder, to realize that Gandhi is an idea of the changing times that cannot be pushed back.

Written between the two wars, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is considered the first significant Indian novel in English and a major tour de force. It captures that turbulent period in Indian life when the long spell of colonialism was coming to an end with a new awakening of national consciousness surging through the land. Gandhi is different from other revolutionaries and anarchists in his ability to combine tradition with radicalism. Wedded to quintessential Indian values, he also put forward avant-garde ideas like freeing up the Dalits from centuries of alienation and challenging the stranglehold of big landlords over rural life. Since his ideology is entrenched in the Indian ethos as a political force, Gandhi is unassailable. He occupies a unique position in Indian politics – the orthodoxy and far right find him anarchical, upsetting the hidebound social arrangement, and the left radicals accuse him of being an apologist for the status quo.

History has proved both wrong.

In the foreword to his book, Rao writes:

'There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich *sthala-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this pipal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahatma himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate.'

Indeed, Gandhi is part of the environment, the collective memory of the man being preserved in every home as precious family heirloom. He cannot be upstaged from his place in history like another leader vulnerable to the changing tastes of a generation or two. Denying him would be like denying India itself, the way this country is. Similarly, any attempt to change India, its core values, the way it has evolved

over thousands of years accommodating and adjusting to new influences, would be like erasing Gandhi himself. That will be a terrible disaster. The village of Kanthapura supplicates to the demon-slaying goddess Kenchamma – ‘great and bounteous is she’. It has its *pariah* colony, indentured workers slaving on the coffee estate, and a corps of radical young men inspired by Gandhi. Moorthy is the new voice of this upheaval challenging the social straitjacket. The real protagonist of Raja Rao’s novel is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Moorthy, his alter ego.

Indian culture has absorbed the Gandhian ethos as much as the epics. He has been mythicized as much as the men and women populating the world of the epics. The consequences of any attempt to alter the deep patterns of our society could only be terrible. Though a little out of context, one is reminded of Stalin’s preposterous move relocating millions of people to culturally alien places to change the demography of a region within the Soviet Union. To replace the Gandhian values of compassion, pluralism and nonviolence with any other set of priorities would be like abandoning the Ramayana and Mahabharata themselves. To alter a single coda from the Indian ensemble is to ask for unprecedented chaos. As a people, we have adopted Gandhi as a beacon exactly the way we are enamoured of our mythical heroes, and we make no distinction between them.

But much before his mythification, the Mahatma was an earthy campaigner travelling through the rough and raw of the freedom struggle. And a brilliant strategist too. About two years after his return from South Africa, he participated in the Champaran peasant protests against the colonial rulers’ diktat to cultivate indigo against their wishes. The concept of satyagraha was successfully put to practice in that movement and earned recognition all over the world. The idea of challenging the world’s mightiest empire by making a little salt from seawater was one of the most brilliant political moves ever made anywhere in history, in terms of its stark simplicity and straightforwardness of appeal. So was his decision to back the Khilafat movement to support the continuation of the caliphate in Turkey. Gandhi’s decision to suspend the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1922 in the wake of the Chauri Chaura violence, his opposition to Partition, his fearless march through the riot-torn villages of Noakhali – each one of his steps was an incredible act of courage and a statement of his conviction. One of his greatest moves, and perhaps the most heroic of his career, was the three-day fast in Calcutta in September 1947 to bring an unheard-of moral pressure on the rioters to stop killing and surrender their arms to him.

Soon after his death, some of Gandhi’s younger associates gathered at Sevagram for an honest exchange of views about how to preserve his legacy and, more importantly, carry forward his unfinished work. Carefully edited by Gopalkrishna Gandhi and published by Permanent Black, *Gandhi is Gone. Who will Guide Us Now?* is a brilliant work of documentation. Among those who participated in the session were Nehru, Maulana Azad, Rajendra Prasad, Jayaprakash Narayan, Vinoba Bhave, Zakir Husain and Pyarelal. Azad set the tone for the session with a grim observation:

‘The thought has kept coming to me – ever since the 30th of January – that all the initiatives Bapu took, all that he put his hands to, came alive because he was there at the centre of those activities, personally. Now he is not there, he is gone. We will never find another spirit like him. We have to devise a means, a method, an arrangement by which the treasure that he gave to us, that gift, that bequest, does not go to ruin.’

Pyarelal Nayar, Gandhi’s close associate, summed up a wide range of concerns about the vacuum and the end-of-an-era angst in one short sentence: ‘Today, our house is on fire.’

Then Nehru, with his trademark eloquence and erudition, put the situation in perspective: ‘The country has split into two – that is an established fact. But the danger is of further fragmentation in the future. Bapu’s death calls out its name loud and clear... we cannot save our freedom without neutralizing the venom of communalism.’

All the wise heads who had gathered at Sevagram in March 1948 were assailed by a gnawing sense of danger gripping the young nation, not even a year old. His absence stressed the criticality of Gandhi's role in coursing the country through an extremely difficult time. And that takes us back to where we began – Gandhi as an inalienable part of our national narrative. Why else would hardened criminals lay down their arms lest the old man die fasting? He derived his real power from an uncanny ability to put the moral burden on his opponents. Each one of us unknowingly cherishes a personal Gandhi moment, the moment someone feels they have experienced a little bit of him.

Do I have a Gandhian moment, too? Well, I wrote about it before and perhaps will have to again so long as I write.

Riots in small towns of UP keep occurring at regular intervals. Very often, without much of a provocation. Towards the end of 1990, the city of Aligarh was convulsed by a surge of Hindu-Muslim clashes. A journalist with *India Today* magazine at that time, I reached Aligarh late one morning to write about the situation. Riots, as those who have any experience of covering them will tell you, are rarely a one-sided affair. Everyone suffers. In Aligarh, the picture alters from one side of the railway track to the other. In the older part of the city, you get one kind of picture; around the university, another.

The entire day I moved from one scene of primordial violence to another, talking to people, taking notes. Pramod Pushkarna, my photojournalist colleague, clicked away those gut-wrenching, visceral scenes. When you see the fallen bodies, what troubles you most is a sense of their utter futility, this insensate violence signifying nothing, a deep disgust about the unreasonableness of it all. The olive trucks of the Indian Army patrolled the streets. At a street crossing, a car was burning after an explosion. A visibly shaken army officer shouted at us. 'I was in Jaffna as part of the IPKF; this is worse than that.' I simply replied that, like him, we too were doing our duty.

Before coming back, we went to the city hospital. The dimly-lit ward we walked into was a scene of neglect. There were neither doctors nor nurses. A woman sitting on a stool by a bed looked at us keenly. 'Are you from the media?'

I was startled by her question. I looked at the patient she was with – a middle-aged woman inside a grimy blanket, the only sign of medication a saline drip incised into her hand.

'She is my *bhabhi*. She has a bullet in her shoulder,' the woman said. Her language was refined, unhesitant. 'First, they took away my nephew, then we found my brother killed near our house and now ...' She choked. Recovering after a while, she suddenly said, without much of a context, 'I work at Gandhi Eye Hospital – Gandhi ... Gandhi ...' She broke down trying to cling to the name with all her force, as if the man, if still around, could have saved her family. She was seeking reassurance from the Mahatma, who had once saved thousands in situations much worse than this.

At that time, I did not know if there was indeed a Gandhi Eye Hospital in Aligarh. Later, whenever I saw an ambulance of that hospital on Delhi roads, that woman came to mind – sitting by the bed of her bullet-ridden sister-in-law in a forlorn corner of the hospital ward, seeking an answer for the tragedy that had struck her from the man who saw virtue in nonviolence. What was her religion? Her community? She was a brave woman who took her case to Gandhi in the middle of madness.

Perhaps many more like her see Gandhi as a kind of talisman that could protect them from civilizational maladies. ■

Bhaskar Roy