

## **VEDANTA PHILOSOPHY IN THE WORKS OF RAJA RAO: A COMMUNION WITH THE TRUTH**

**Gurpreet Singh**

Assistant Professor of English,  
SGGS College, Sector 26, Chandigarh

**Dr. Mahesh Kumar Arora**

Professor of English,  
SLIET, Longowal,  
Punjab

### **Abstract**

Raja Rao is universally acknowledged as a novelist of philosophical consciousness. The metaphysics in his novels which is generally construed to be Vedantic, led a number of scholars to interpret his work from an exclusively Vedantic point of view. Though Rao believed in Indian culture and ethos, he regarded novel-writing as a private endeavor at exploring the human psyche. His work is found profoundly absorbed in essential tenets of metaphysics. However, Rao's novels remain literary pieces despite this depth and its strong current of ideological references. Rao proclaims that he was trying to integrate Sanskrit tradition with contemporary intellectual heroism in terms of both language and structure. Though the action of his novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* extends to France and England, the roots of identity are effectively tethered to the strong, yet invisible bonds of traditional vedantic culture.

Keywords: India, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Religion, Vedanta

### **INTRODUCTION**

Raja Rao made a conscious choice to explore the deep recesses of human mind. The probe was neither rooted in psychology nor emotions. It, instead, selected a more subtle level of consciousness which pertained to the human spirit. Rao's novels examine aspects of the sensibility which involved being, faith and belief. His writings invariably manifest his quest for Truth. The novelist realised that literature is also a spiritual experience as it is an extension of his sadhana. Therefore his writing stems from his total dedication to metaphysics. The writer is essentially a man who strives for metaphysical experience. After spiritual realisation, the writer-sadhaka is compelled to express it and literature is created. Firmly committed to the task of fulfilling his sadhana through spiritual discipline, ardour and self-surrender, he does not practice

writing as a profession. He attains sublimity through guidance from a guru capable of imparting 'drishti' to him.

### CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Rao discovered that the inner essence of man seeks Truth and strives for merger with the Ultimate Reality. The incessant search for the Absolute thus became the theme - song of Raja Rao's novels. Modelled on Indian epics, they are rooted in the Advaita Darshan of Sankaracharya. Thought, philosophy, belief, felt-experience and diverse religious influences form the basic data of Rao's creative psyche where no boundaries exist. The traditional framework may be restrictive but Rao's genius penetrates through the apparent to grasp the inner core of reality. Truth being Truth remains the same despite its manifestations. Intensive readings, felt experiences were all Rao's voyages of discovery into the nature of Truth, differences between appearance and reality, existence and death related issues. Being a sadhaka by nature, Rao was insatiated in his appetite for knowledge. The resultant insight inspired greater cognizance. Given this basic perception and inclination towards religion and philosophy, Rao could have become a model philosopher had he not chosen literature as a mode of expression. The novel form suited his purpose. The format of fiction readily provided Rao with framework for his philosophical probes. The components of the novel form - characters, situations, incidents, interrelationships and analogies supplied the human angle and each work became an instrument, furthering his experiment with Truth. The novels provided structural framework for his innermost thoughts and belief patterns.

Vedanta philosophy is no mere speculation into the nature of reality. It is a sublime and unique system based on mystic and spiritual experience. It gives clear solutions to profound subtle problems of life and reveals the way to final emancipation. Vedanta philosophy is the study of the ultimate nature of things. It is the investigation into the final cause or causes of all phenomena. Philosophy is not a theory but a vision of life (darsana). With intuitive perception in Truth, the rishis and sages of India founded certain philosophical systems.

Philosophy permeating through Raja Rao's novels is generally held to be Vedantic in tone and temper. Being a Vedantin, he seeks Truth on the lines of 'Advaitavada' and frequently refers to the precepts from the Upanishads. To him, writing is a visible expression of his deeply-felt spiritual experiences. Duly recognising man's deep need to seek and realize Truth, he endeavours to revive the traditional Indian quest with all its rigour. The Vedantic doctrines such as 'Advaita Vedanta' of Sankara recurrently appear in Rao's writings. A study of the Upanishads aids in attainment of knowledge and realization. 'Upa' means 'near' and 'shad' means 'to sit'. The medium of this exercise is the shared bond and closeness to the guru or spiritual preceptor. The whole edifice of the mystic culture in India rests upon the Upanishads. They are the fountainhead of deep divine esoteric knowledge which provides freedom from earthly bondage. The practical hints and essential clues embodied within these metaphysical treatises throw abundant light on the path to self-realization. Knowledge of the Upanishads destroys ignorance and materialistic learning present in the mind of the aspiring sadhaka.

The Advaita philosophy of Sankaracharya forms the core of Raja Rao's fictional world. 'Live to acquire knowledge, do not acquire knowledge to live' has been the aim of life of great thinkers of India since time immemorial. India has always been home to great seers and sages. The cycle of life and death, though endless has to terminate for a realized soul. Knowledge of the Atman being identical with the Self liberates one from the cycle of births and death and bestows immortality. The highest aim of life and consequently of Indian philosophy is the achievement of

bliss (ananda) because the world is full of miseries. No being in the universe can assert with confidence that there is no pain. Thus being tortured by the miseries of the world, the suffered approaches the wise man and asks for the remedy to end his miseries. The seeker is thus advised that the only ways to achieve the end of miseries is the realization of the self.

The Vedanta proclaims that in the beginning there existed neither 'being' nor non-being' but there was an indescribable something called darkness. Even this darkness would have existence for its basis because without it, even darkness would not exist.

The man of wisdom considers both failure and success alike. He attains the non-dual state of Truth by sacrificing his ego (entity) through transcendental meditation. Once the ego is sacrificed into the Atman, one becomes a jivanmuka, liberated while alive; Raja Rao says that like a burning camphor one should live without leaving any trace behind. In his non-fictional work *The Meaning of India*, Rao has elaborated on crucial issues pertaining to the essential nature of Indian metaphysics. Bringing together the cardinal principles of practicing religions of India and the basic tenets of philosophy and ethics, Rao sought to redefine faith and belief in the context of contemporary thought.

*Kanthapura*, his first novel, develops on the twin principle search for betterment, perception and the absolute necessity of sacrifice without which the quest is meaningless. The relationship between man and universe and its realization through word becomes the meaning in the meaning. The pervading theme of the novel is not just a quest for individual self as mentioned by some of the prominent critics of Rao but also an incessant and collective search for identity. The struggle for independence provides a colourful motif, imparting a nationalistic flavour to the entire experience. As a consequence, when Moorthy, a brahmin, pursues his private journey into the region of Truth and absolute reality, the people of *Kanthapura* (in addition to being significant separate groups) unite under the protective umbrella of 'one for one cause'. *Kanthapura*, in its totality, becomes a single entity engrossed in the massive struggle to overthrow the immoral, corrupt forces of exploitation which were equivalent and parallel to forces of 'ajnana' or ignorance. On the individual level-as Moorthy and collective level-as *Kanthapura*, the novel manifests a slow and gradual progress towards the discovery of the Ultimate Truth regarding being and existence which was one of Rao's prime preoccupations as a philosopher-novelist. *Kanthapura*, thus, is a perspective where an individual's life moves constantly in search of the Self. The people of *Kanthapura* were inordinately led into the path of political struggle for attaining freedom. This ultimately culminated in the freedom for the Self.

The title of Rao's second novel - *The Serpent and the Rope* refers to the concept of illusion and reality. Influenced by Sankaracharya's philosophy, it emphasises the dichotomy between the two and establishes the fact that reality and illusion are two faces of the same coin. They are co-existent. Though illusion cannot exist in isolation, it is the essence that gives meaning to reality. This is done through the phenomenon of duality. The insubstantial objects of dreams have no existence beyond sleep. Similarly observed extant world around the individual is non-existent in the truest sense. The discovery of actual truth regarding the riddle of being releases the self from the trap of birth and death. Lack of understanding makes life futile. Hence a perception of reality regarding self is required as this embodies the Supreme Truth. Only when a quester realizes the transitory nature of the "serpent" and "illusory" nature of Reality, can he perceive the mutability of world experience. Dissociating himself from the world, he tends to minimise his bodily activities. The rope-snake illusion employed by Rao can be further explained through an analogy provided by the scriptures. In this moral parallel, a man moving through a dense forest at night, saw a snake and jumped, causing injury and pain to his leg. Just then a man

carrying a lantern in his hand helped him to discover that it was not a snake but a rope. The perception of the snake in this parallel tale lay in incognizance about the nature of the rope. Such wayward and incomplete understanding of the world is rooted in ignorance. Knowledge of Brahman only can help to understand the real nature of the snake and the rope.

The individual consciousness 'sees' but does not 'recognize' the 'rope', thus wrongly discerning the 'snake' in the 'rope'. The cause for misunderstanding is not the rope but the pre-conceived notion of the object before the eyes. It explains the highest philosophy in the simplest terms. Just as an unreal snake is superimposed on the real rope, similarly, the phenomenal world is superimposed on the non-phenomenal - the Atman or Brahman. This is the only reality which transcends the phenomenal 'real' and the 'unreal'. The basic reason for this misapplied superimposition of the unseen over the seen is absence of proper discrimination.

As soon as the tangibility of the rope is recognised, the snake vanishes along with the fear and agitation of mind and body. In actuality, the dual-perception of a snake in a rope, and rope in snake confound intelligence. When a person apprehends illusion in reality or reality in illusion, it is the mind that drifts through maya (illusion) and creates a specious world of distinction between seer and seen and dual perception of cause and effect. According to Acharya Sankara, the whole world of duality consisting of subject and object is only an act of the mind. The mind is only an organiser of sensory operations. Even though absorbed in deep sleep, it projects the surroundings in waking and dream states. The cosmos prevails as long as this filter functions and ceases to exist in its absence.

Rao also believed in the attainment of an impersonal state which was beyond the physical and mental. It was an experience of the spirit. Through all his novels, he makes an elaborate effort to reach this state. The Serpent and the Rope needs to be examined against this sound background from scriptures and metaphysics from Rao's own *The Meaning of India*.

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Rao has generously granted Ramaswamy physicality. He has been provided an aura of a rich culture and Vedic tradition. The concretisation has added life as well as colour to the portrayal. It has also lent authenticity to his personality. Ramaswamy unintentionally adopts the route of world experience. He wanders in search of a spiritual preceptor who could lead him over the threshold of Immortality. In this sojourn, he comes across many people, mainly women, who appear to his young, dispassionate, discriminating and perceptive psyche as various manifestations of the omnipotent God. He interacts with each of them on various levels.

The novel beautifully expounds 'jnana yoga'. Ramaswamy's quest for fulfilment comes to a conclusion through knowledge ('jnana'). His faith is born out of self effort. Being a scholar, an intellectual and a metaphysician, he realizes that he has to do all by himself, though the clue to get out of the labyrinth of maya will be shown by the mentor whom he seeks. Only the spiritual guide can help him out of the darkness of ignorance, releasing within him, and the light of knowledge. The title of the novel suggests two ways of apprehending reality. The first way is the recognition of the object as object and the other is the recognition that the object exists because the perceiver perceives it.

The young intellectual in the novel is one such seeker after knowledge, which treads the path of spiritual insight to reach his goal. Throughout the novel, he is seen to be dissatisfied with the world. There is a lingering void in his life. He comes to know that sensual pleasure is not the highest form of happiness and that pure eternal bliss, the truly spiritual experience can only be felt within the mind. In this respect Ramaswamy resembles Uddhava who got wisdom from Lord

Krishna. At the end of the novel, the quester perceives a ray of hope that his guru may impart wisdom and thus enlighten his path towards self-realization.

The Cat and Shakespeare mythicises the transition of a sadhaka to a bhakta. A sadhaka searches for the Ultimate Knowledge latent beneath the veil of maya and a bhakta believes in total surrender before God. Both aspire to reach the same destination adopting different modes. When the quester succeeds in attaining complete detachment through the medium of faith and worship, and his love becomes fully involved in reaching the Supreme Being, he becomes transformed into a bhakta.

Thus the practice implies intense attachment to God. A thread of divine love ties the heart of a devotee to the Lord. It results in supreme dedication and devotion. This sacred and sublime emotion unites the votary to the Supreme. Bhakti in its purest manifestation is a formidable task of developing a consistently perennial pneuma. The innate nature of all human beings is attachment and desire for external objects as sense perceptions display tendencies of divergence (inside out). The dispersed longings and aspirations get fascinated by countless visible and tangible objects of the universe. Devotion requires a motivation to centralise these "wandering" thought processes of the human mind. Convergence does not, however, imply infatuation with earthly objects which enamour and confine the individual into the cycle of mortality. Instead, it refers to pure and unselfish love for God. The greatest hindrance in this cherished goal is man's ego. All systems of philosophy aim at rooting out the ego. Bhakti-marga is one such method of annihilating the consciousness of the independent, individual self. Compared to 'jnana-marga', this is a more tractable way of reaching the Absolute. In the 'jnana-marga', the votary experiences difficulty in focussing the mind on Brahman who is above form and 'attribute'. But in bhakti marga, the devotee establishes an intimate relationship with God by concentrating his mind on a symbol of the Lord.

Rao accepts The Cat and Shakespeare as the "conclusion" of The Serpent and the Rope. Thematically succeeding the novel, it forms yet another landmark in the spiritual journey of the novelist. The Serpent and the Rope advocated Sankaracharya's philosophy of 'Advaitavada' or unqualified non-dualism and The Cat and Shakespeare propounds Ramanuja's theory of 'Vishishtadvaitavada' or qualified-monism. Ramanuja's celebrated system is so called because it speaks about God with implied attributes. It is advaita or non-dualism with qualifications. Sankara holds 'avidya' or ignorance responsible for not understanding the manifestations of God. The unreal appears real. Ramanuja regarded attributes as real and permanent but subject to the control of Brahman. The two principal characters in The Cat and Shakespeare are Govindan Nair and Ramakrishna Pai. They are simple, ordinary people for whom realization is possible only through acts of faith and surrender. This accounts for Rao's use of familiar and domestic items of human experience as symbols.

The novel presents the subtle interplay of the comic and the serious, the amorous and the metaphysical. The strange juxtaposition of apparently heterogeneous elements (like 'cat' and 'Shakespeare') in the novel lend complexity to the text. Apparently diverse symbols interpreted in a homogeneous manner help Rao in the attainment of singleness of vision. As the story-element is very thin in the novel, the narrator uses it as an instrument for conveying the deep philosophy of life. The guru, Nair, instructs the disciple into the subtle understanding of life through humour and equipoise of psyche. Deeper truths are explained through correlatives and the intangible is thus easily apprehended. The experience of Rao's The Cat and Shakespeare leaves the reader and the quester with a sense of wonder and amazement which triggers a plummeting of the psyche into a state of disbelief and amazement.

The meaning of India is a treatise in which Rao has summed up numerous metaphysical issues. Some of these experiences become core material for his novels. The need for awareness, discovery into the nature of self and the Absolute reality, moral dilemmas and skepticism, perception into duality, realization of oneness Brahman, and the necessity of a guide or mentor to lead the seeker from ignorance into knowledge are Rao's themes. He has meticulously woven these thought patterns within the framework of the novels. With one primary theme serving as the unifying link, Rao created settings, characters, incidents and connected his all novels into a single unit of experience. In addition to this totality, individual novels stand as separate entities with distinct narrative styles. Beginning with kanthapura as a 'sthala-purana or legendary history, Rao accomplished his task as an individualistic novelist with the self-desired blank pages of The Cat and Shakespeare.

### References

1. Raja Rao, The Meaning of India (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1996).
2. Swami Satyananda, Teachings and Lectures (Munger: Bihar School of Yoga, 1982).
3. Som P. Sharma, "Raja Rao's Search for the Feminine" in K.K. Sharma, ed., Perspectives on Raja Rao (Ghaziabad: Vimal Prakashan, 1980).
4. K.R.S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1985).
5. C. Paul Verghese, Problems of Indian Creative Writers in English. (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1971).
6. Vasant A. Shahane, "Fiction and Reality in Raja Rao" in M.K. Naik, ed Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1985).