

RURAL ETHOS IN KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S "NECTAR IN A SIEVE"

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Indian society is composed of people belonging to a variety of religions, sects, castes and tribes. Looking at the social history of India, it is argued that the downfall of Buddhism gave rise to Brahmanism. According to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of Indian constitution, Brahmanism brought a number of (negative) changes. It made the Brahmans a class of privileged people; it brought about conflicts and anti-social feelings between different castes and changed things for making them suitable for their interest. Dr. Ambedkar, also a leading revolutionary of Dalit-Bahujan movement, insisted that the true religion should be rationalist, based on truth. Even Mahatma Gandhi, the father of our nation, was always struggling for the emancipation of untouchables. He wanted to develop a sense of unity among all the people, irrespective of their castes, communities, groups and gender. His chief aim was to improve the miserable condition of the untouchables and the deprived classes belonging to the various sections of society. Among all those social reformers, Mahatma Phule was a revolutionary thinker who promoted non-Brahman thinking in the modern period. According to Phule Brahmanism is a powerful system of oppression to women, peasants and untouchables. Therefore, he reacted against the ordination of caste and the performance of rituals by the Brahman priests. He offered Sarvajanic Satyadharma, i.e. universal religion of truth and proclaimed equality among men, women, peasants and untouchables. As a social thinker, Phule tried to solve many socio-economic problems by imparting education, especially to the women and untouchables. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj was also one of the social revolutionaries who struggled against Brahman bureaucracy. He fought against the domination and supremacy of Brahmans in education, administration and politics. He was an early originator and a designer of the reservation policy for backward and underprivileged classes. As a revolutionary social reformer, he made primary education compulsory, especially to the girls and less privileged classes in society. Apart from the above mentioned social reformers and activists, there were others like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, M.G. Ranade and Maharshi Karve who had taken up social issues such as the abolition of 'sati' and remarriage of the widows.

It shows that the identity of India was/is known by the religion, culture and language of her people. In fact, the issue of identity is not important to those who belong to the dominant culture/religion/society, but it is important to those who are 'broken' 'marginalized' and 'outsiders' For Hindus, caste is one of the important marks of identification. Each caste group has its distinct identity and diverse ways of life. Since the members of several castes were called Hindus, they were supposed to uniformly worship Hindu gods and goddesses in temple, but some of them were not allowed to enjoy their religious and civil rights. Especially, the earlier inhabitants like Adivasi communities and untouchables were disadvantaged and deprived of their

religious practices and civil rights. Even, today, many of the Adivasi communities are deprived of their rights and are dislocated and dislodged due to some dominant forces.

Besides religion and caste as categories of grouping in Indian society, gender is also an important category. In Vedic period, women were not allowed to recite or listen to Vedic hymns and were treated as subordinate and inferior. In the words of S.M. Dahiwale (2005: 12): “In traditional Hindu order, a woman is not viewed to be independent, because she is protected in her childhood by her parents, after marriage by her husband and in the old age by her son.” This clearly shows how Indian patriarchy is quite rude and old in controlling the ‘second sex’. But in the postmodern period, the status of Indian woman has changed and the compartmentalization between men and women is being broken down.

Disparities and discrepancies exist in Indian society. So the anti-Brahmin movement is considered to be a source of elimination of social inequality and discrimination between castes and communities, which have been always oppressed for centuries. This movement has even initiated a programme against religion, gender and caste discrimination and prejudice. In short, anti-Brahmin movement attempts to maintain the unity and harmony of the oppressed, untouchables, adivasis, Muslims, Christians and other underprivileged minority groups.

Kamala Markandaya was a pseudonym used by Kamala Purnaiya-Taylor, an Indian novelist and journalist. A native of Mysore, India, Markandaya was a graduate of Madras University; and afterwards published several short stories in Indian newspapers. Markandaya moved to Great Britain, though she still labeled herself an Indian expatriate long afterwards.

Kamala Markandaya was known for writing about culture clash between Indian urban and rural societies, her first published novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, was a best seller novel. Markandaya died in London on May 16, 2004. She belonged to that pioneering group of Indian women writers who made their mark not just through their subject matter, but also their fluid polished literary style. *Nectar in a Sieve*, was a depiction of rural India and the suffering of farmers, made it popular in the west.

Kamala Markandaya is one of the most outstanding and eminent Indo-Anglican novelists. Her first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is about rural India. It depicts the story of a simple peasant couple from South India. The novel deals with industrialization and its impact on rural life. The problems of rural India and the tragic predicament of Indian peasants have been depicted with moving realism. It focuses effectively on the theme of hunger. Social problems such as poverty, beggary, lack of family planning, the 'Zamindari' system, industrialization, demoralization, caste and class conflict, crime, unemployment, prostitution, superstitions, dowry system, low status of women, evil of the marriage system etc. are very tellingly portrayed by Kamala Markandaya in this novel.

The village depicted in this novel is a South Indian village. Kamala Markandaya has not named her fictional locale. But the village becomes the microcosm of rural India. The novel presents the life of simple rural people of a South Indian village. The village people are worried about the minimum basic needs and are engaged in different agricultural activities. Rukmani the protagonist of the novel and the narrator, is married to a poor tenant farmer Nathan, in a South Indian village. They have a daughter named Ira and six sons named Arjun, Thambi, Murugan, Selvam, Raja, and Kutti. The peace of the village is disturbed by the arrival of townsmen to build a tannery there. The evils of industrialization like inflation and ugliness grow rapidly. Ira, who is married to a farmer is deserted by her husband as she is barren. The family, on the verge of starvation, has no option but to assent to Arjun and Thambi joining the tannery. But due to their

raising a voice of protest they are dismissed from work and they go to Ceylon. Murugan also goes to the city. Due to terrible drought, the family starves. Raja dies and Kuti falls ill. The poor girl, Ira seeing her family starve during the famine, turns into a woman of the street and gives birth to an illegitimate albino child, who becomes the pet of Selvam.

Starvation takes away Old Granny and Kuti. Rukmani and Nathan leave the village in search of Murugan, who himself has left his wife and gone away. With the help of Puli, a young orphan, they survive on charity and petty jobs. Nathan dies. Rukmani returns to her village with Puli. The rural people are illiterate, Rukmani, an exception, knows how to read and write. She teaches her children at home because she can not afford to send them to school. The village that has been depicted in this novel has two facets: one, the quiet village before the introduction of technology and the other, after starving the tannery. Agricultural is the main stay of the village. Kamala Markandaya portrays not the life of the big landlords but the life of the landless farmers who are also the most neglected people. Rukmani has come from a family, who own the land they till. But her husband Nathan does not own the land that he tills. The landless farmer, in particular, is constantly in the grip of fear of the land being snatched away, the failure or excesses of rains, droughts, etc. Markandaya gives a very realistic and touching account of such fear: "The calamities of the land belong to it alone, born of wind and rain and weather, immensities not to be tempered by man or his creation. To those who live by the land there must always come a time of hardship, of fear and of hunger"(181). A farmer has no hope for the future. Yet he maintains hope, amidst fear of getting disappointment. Rukmani sums up the life of a peasant, when she says: "Hope and fear. Twin forces that hugged us first in one direction and then in another, and which one was stronger no one could say ... fear, constant companion of the peasant....fear, fear of the dark future; fear of the blackness of death"(110)

The woman in a traditional Indian family is always subordinate to the man. While the sons are considered assets and the daughters are considered a burden on the family. When the first born child is a daughter, Rukmani is very disappointed, "for what woman want a girl child for her first born"(25). Nathan "wanted a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land, not a pulling infant who would take with her a dowry and leave nothing but a memory behind"(27). Rukmani thinks that it is a punishment for her past sins: "I have no sons, only one child; a girl...why should it be?...Am I not clean and healthy?"(32).

In the village, more than in the city, a childless woman--even one with a daughter but without a son --is considered an illfated one. The life of a woman, who has no children at all is worse. Ira's husband deserts her because she is barren. Hence the husband in the rural area has the social sanction to discard his barren wife. It is natural that Rukmani easily reconciles herself to Ira's ill fate and consoles her: "You must not blame him. He has taken another woman"(65).

While socio-religious forces create problems of acceptability and respectability for the childless woman, lack of money for survival drives her to prostitution, as it happens in case of Ira. Prostitution is a major social problem today in both the urban and rural areas. Ira wants to save her ailing brother. She is tired of poverty and hunger. Kunti, a village woman also takes to prostitution. It is a question of demand and supply. Nathan calls Ira a 'harlot' and never touches even the food that is bought with Ira's earnng. Markandaya portrays the fate of the prostitutes very realistically.

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