

## Raja Rao's *Vedantic Strains*

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### Abstract

That Raja Rao's novels are not only the testimony of an intellectual giant's writing fling, but they go beyond the textual exploring spiritual dimensions which tell us much more about both India, is the edifice of this paper. The principal focus of this study is to describe the *vedantic* strains in the major novels of Raja Rao. It is to let younger society grasp the extraordinary mental display of the Hindu civilization.

Raja Rao love for his spiritual quest for self-realisation is accepted worldwide. His works have a multi-dimensional approach, dealing with socio-cultural aspects as well as spiritual aspects, but the vedantic strain is the main one. Rao is the writer who understood the spiritual illness of that age and came out with practical solutions in the form of novels. Rao's four major novels: *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* form the basis for the metaphysical concepts, particularly, *advaita* of Shankaracharya. As literature is *sadhana* for Raja Rao so his literary endeavors are actually his spiritual attainments.

**Keywords:** Raja Rao, Spirituality, Religion, Advaita Vedanta, Shankaracharya, Self-Realization.

The aim of the present paper is to focus on the *Vedantic* strains as spiritual endeavours of Raja Rao. He was the youngest literary stalwart of the trio-majestic writers – Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and he himself.

Raja Rao's work has a multi-dimensional approach, dealing with socio-cultural aspects as well as spiritual aspects. Rao's four major novels: *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cat and Shakespeare*, and *The Chessmaster and His Moves* present metaphysical concepts, particularly, *advaita* of Shankaracharya. He has incorporated the spiritual journey of human life, covering the various spectrums of social, political, and cultural aspects with all dexterity possible. The social, political, and cultural frameworks have always been mediums of expression for the seeker of truth, as a writer, thus being the medium of spiritual quest for Raja Rao too.

Spirituality is not just a mental balm to soothe our sorrows but to enlighten our lives in order to make our lives sublime. Raja Rao is the writer who understood the spiritual illness of that age and came out with practical solutions in the form of novels. Literature is *sadhana* for Raja Rao and his literary endeavours are actually his spiritual attainments. This can be examined through various philosophical perspectives.

Though Raja Rao's literary production consists of relatively few volume, published at wide intervals, still has very significantly introduced a myriad of philosophical and spiritual issues. These aspects of Raja Rao's writings have given critics great difficulties both in interpreting and evaluating his works. His work is not only a testimony of an intellect which goes beyond the textual, but also of a spiritual dimension which tells us much more about both India and Europe.

Indian philosophy presents spirituality in a wider spectrum and its relationship with other sciences. In India, religion enfolds body and soul, from conception to dissolution. Religion is the backbone of the Indian society. It is the secret premise of family, thought and action. It is expressed through the speech, the hymns, the myths, and the stories. Religion can largely be used as a tool of expression and understanding the Indian psyche.

A comparison of religion and spirituality could be understood in brief. Religion is an organised and oriented behaviour and involves mostly outward practices, whereas spirituality is less formal, systematic but more inwardly directed rather. In the other words we can say that religion can be characterized in different way. Religion has an organized system of beliefs. It has its own practices, rituals, and symbol.

Contrary to it spirituality can be considered as the personal quest for finding answer to the ultimate question about life by own self. In this process one establishes a very pure relationship with the sacred or transcendent.

Though if we think deep then religion and spirituality both exhibit a few common characteristics and there are certainly some non-shared features. Spirituality is the kernel of religion. There are some empirical studies of both spirituality and religion, and they have rarely made operational distinctions between the two. From the point of view of the highest reality, there is no difference between *Brahman* and the individual self or the *atman*. 1

Manifestation of spirituality is personal findings. There are many forms of this manifestation which occur in personal context. If we compare it with religious ones, we find that it mostly addresses the social affairs. There is a growing tendency of belief then that spirituality is ever good, and religion is ever bad. Though there could be no justification for such attributions as both have potentially been beneficial for the human beings.

Then there are some spiritual experiences in an organized religious context also. This polarization of spirituality and religion may lead to needless duplication in concepts and practices in general. Sacredness includes the divine and transcendent. And it is the common denominator of religious and spiritual life. They say spirituality is search for the sacred. It is a process through which people seek to discover. People hold on to and transform whatever they hold blessed in their lives. In the spiritual traditions of India, transcendence goes beyond sensory awareness. Spiritual pursuit is a great exercise for the transformation of the human condition to achieve that transcendence.

In India, spirituality is the true quest and religion is the best tool to get it. These are the activities that run parallel to each other. Both principles stand on the backbone of seeking the ultimate truth. These discoveries have had enormous influence on people across cultures and around the world. However, their comparative role dominance has varied over time. Today science clearly has the upper hand. The underlying perspective of such a concept should be one that does not put science against spirituality, or vice-versa. It postulates unity and complementarity between them at perhaps a more profound level than is obvious to the common sense.

In this context, spiritual psychology, which attempts to gain unified understanding of the transcendental and empirical domains of our existence and experience, appears to be the discipline that holds the key. Scientific temperament of mind and spiritual outlook are not opposed to each other. Instead, they serve different functions. However, together they hold the best hope of achieving the highest happiness with fewer risks.

There is no essential difference between science and spirituality. In the Indian tradition, both science and spirituality have the same goal, and that is *moksha* (liberation). Science and its offshoot technologies provide plenty for all. The growth is not without its problems, however. The explosive growth of science with its unpredictable consequences threatens to subvert and

distort the life itself on this planet. Nuclear energy and genetic engineering, for example, which have had an extraordinary potential to transform the human condition, are more feared today than ever. The promise of science to meet human needs has not helped to reduce its needs. Rather, it spurned the insatiable desire for more. Even Sri Ramakrishna after declaring ‘As many faiths, so many paths’, says: ‘No one can put a limit to spiritual experience. If you refer to one experience, there is another beyond that, and still another, and so on!’ 2

Spirituality could be soothing syrup to such congested minds. It also serves to relieve depression and instill hope and strength to lead a less stressful life. At the same time, religious beliefs purported to spirituality may also be seen as a blinding influence that shun reason, spurt superstitious behaviour, and suffocate ambition and achievement. Instead of liberating, it could exile the human spirit into the darkness of ignorance, disease, and deprivation. They could be used to emancipate or to enslave. It would be equally inappropriate to ask for a spiritual explanation of the structure of atom.

Science and spirituality spring from the human mind. However, they manifest as two distinct modes. One is the rational mode. It is mediated by the senses, the nervous system, and the brain. The other, being the intuitive mode, is the revelation component of spiritual experience. Therefore, it is the transcendental aspect of human life that is not mediated by any other resource but is directly experienced. It processes a consciousness known as ‘being’.

In the Indian tradition, spirituality is considered as trans-cognitive. Spiritual psychology explores science and spirituality together in the phenomena that are joint manifestations of the senses and reason on one hand and intuition and experience on the other. Without miracle and mystical experiences, the sacred texts of most religions would be left with very little credible substance. Science is based on reason and observation. Spiritual truths are born of revelations and are anchored in experience. Spirituality explores the unity of the spirit, the mind, and the body as they manifest in the human context.

In Indian literature, philosophy is termed as *darshana* -- the vision of truth. As reality is multifaceted, truth is also manifold. Each system approaches reality from one point of view or level of experience and embodies just one aspect of the truth.

This study focuses on the fact that the aim of philosophical wisdom is not merely the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity but significantly an enlightened life led with farsightedness, foresight, and insight.

To understand the works of Raja Rao, a fair knowledge of his mental horizon is necessary for he had gathered in him the traditional wisdom of Indian *rishis* (saints). He combined it with his intimate knowledge of the western religion and philosophy. Further, his amazing erudition is

embellished by a brilliance of wit and analysis. Rao comes close in this sense to Sri Ramakrishna who often asked spiritual seekers not to put a limit to the nature of God. 3

Raja Rao was a man endowed with a greater portion of ethereal energy to show the extraordinary display of human intellect. He was a litterateur, a philosopher, *avedantin*, a lover of India and its ways and ideologies. As a great son of soil, he proves himself as a brand cultural ambassador of India. It has enabled a novelist of ideas like Raja Rao to present all that is the best in the Indian tradition through the portrayal of his protagonists. He was a genius who could talk of *Nirvana-Astakam of Sankara*, *Dakshinamurti Stotram*, *Pascal*, *Albigensian heresy* and the civilization of the *Cathars*, and the *Advaita Vedanta*, Buddhism and Christianity, all in the same breath and depth.

This unique combination of an Orientalist patriot and cosmopolitan Occidentalists had enabled Raja Rao to depict the Indian life and its values to the Western ones and vice-versa. The essence of this work is to know the world and to make it a better place by the mutual understanding of people to bridge the cultural gaps.

In his writings, Raja Rao does not deny the world, its sufferings, brutality, and violence. In the real sense, his works are imbued with the real problem of *dukkha*, the cosmic sorrow that every man seeks to eliminate from the world. Rao's answers point inward, from the exterior to the interior, from the outside to the inside, from the world to the self. Rao is one of the truest philosophical novelists in English that India has so far produced. Raja Rao's novels present a record of his spiritual attainments, in the course of his life.

Literature or any artistic expression is known as the mirror of humans, society, and its civilization. After all, art imitates life. Therefore, there remains a strong relevance of humans and the society to literature. For this reason, literature is not only taken as a surface level of delight but of values too. Literature is known as the vehicle carrying human life and human emotions. It shows the vicissitudes of human life encompassing a country's civilization with all artistic beauty and thus helping mankind in overcoming their crises of life.

A great novelist is a great seeker and a keen observer of life. He has the potential to lead the society with his soothing words. This is why Indian traditions have deeply been rooted in the psyche of Indian thinkers and writers, to be a *Sadhak*. It is important to mention that Valmiki and Vyasa entered the trance state of deep meditation and concentration before writing the grand epic. We can see our ancestors' quest went deeper into the mystery of human existence even in their literary writings. They tried to discover within themselves that Truth which is the Eternal among ephemeral, the consciousness of all conscious beings. That One which pervades the many. We find this concept in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* also: '*Nityao nityanam chetna's*

*chetananam eko bahunam yo vidadhati Kaman tamatmastham ye anupashyanti dhirah tesham sukham shashvatam netaresham.* '4

True to this concept, Rao first became an ardent seeker of truth; an ascetic and a follower of stern discipline, and only then he enabled himself to be the creator of valued literature. It holds well in the case of Indian literature. Very few Indian writers could handle the microscopic view to envisage the truth of life through the contradictory world views of Oriental and Occidental in terms of basic issues like sex, marriage, society, religion, learning and death. Raja Rao, a passionate supporter of Indian ethos, stayed in France from the age of twenty to pursue research on what he liked to believe, the mysticism of the West. Though he kept his periodic visits to his home intact but, in reality, he became an expatriate, moving from France to the States. And this long exile strengthened his attachment to the Indian soil and soul. He became an ardent seeker of truth while observing the vicissitudes of his life. His fertile legacy and learning of his ancestors helped him to pave his way of self-realization in literature quite effortlessly. Thus, hailing from a south Indian family, including the ancestor Vidyanaraya Swami – the greatest profounder of non-dualism after Shankaracharya -- and childhood spent under the spiritual influence of his grandfather, made Rao a spectator of his own life rather than the sufferer. The fictional technique of Rao had the inherent potential of 'Indianness' because of its rich literary and cultural heritage.

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