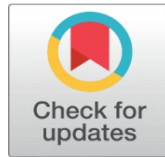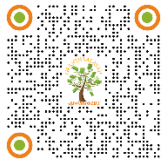# RAJA RAO'S KANTHAPURA: A STUDY IN THE LIGHT OF INDIAN ORAL TRADITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Indian writers have significantly impacted literature worldwide by offering new perspectives and compelling stories to people globally. Authors such as Rushdie, R.K. Narayan, and Rabindranath Tagore have brought Indian stories and personalities to life through their works, infusing them with the rich flavours and textures of Indian culture. Raja Rao significantly contributed to the development of the English novel in India. He skillfully fictionalises the diverse socio-cultural, economic, and interpersonal interactions of different people. These elements of Indian ethos include religiosity and spirituality. Achakka, a character in the novel, narrates how Kanthapura assimilates the oral traditions seen as deeply rooted in the Indian knowledge system.

This paper highlights Rao's narrative techniques and how he uses oral traditions to portray India's freedom struggle. Further, the paper intends to explore Raja Rao's Kanthapura as a narrative rooted in Indian oral tradition. It emphasises how Moorthy uses Harikatha and Bhajans to unite people and fight for independence. This paper attempts to establish how Raja Rao used oral traditions that were deeply rooted in Indian society and played a significant role in India's freedom struggle.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Harikatha, Bhajans, Folklore

1. INTRODUCTION

In pre-modern South Asian literature and written narratives, there is a narrow divide between folk and written storytelling. Pre-modern South Asian literature predominantly consisted of kathas, representing epic traditions. Kathas were stories and tales performed in front of an audience. Epic traditions were popular in both oral and textual forms. These traditions relied on verbal communication to convey information. They were also literary, meaning they existed in written form. The Ramayana traditions, widely practiced in the Indian subcontinent, are a prime example of the interplay between oral and written narratives. In South Asia, oral literary traditions were passed down through generations using unique memory skills. After centuries of oral literature, they were eventually written down and became literary. During the second millennium AD, there was a growing reliance between oral and textual sources. This trend paralleled the emergence of regional

languages. Sufi and Bhakti Movements contributed to the evolution and structure of Indian languages. Saints preached in local languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, and Bengali, which were widely understood by the populace. As a result, popular culture emerged among society's members.During this time, folk and oral narratives were used in literary writings, as well as the performance of written tales.

During that time, Kathas were performed across the Indian subcontinent based on the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and epic traditions. The Katha tradition in South Asia exemplifies the relationship between folk and written narratives. Other examples include the Jataka tales of Panchatantra, which were written but told orally in 'folk' culture.They existed in both written and oral narratives. Jataka tales were passed down through oral tradition and were not written by independent individuals. This trait made these tales both 'folk' and literary.

A folktale is a story or legend that is part of an oral tradition. Folktales are typically passed down from generation to generation and often reflect the time and region in which they are recounted. These stories address universal and eternal issues, assisting people in making sense of their lives and coping with their surroundings.

There are various forms of stories, including family narratives, supernatural experiences, miracles, saints' life stories, and brief anecdotes concerning local history. Unlike myths and epics, which are mega-narratives, legends are micro-stories. These legends pass down through generations, forming a local perspective based on the sociocultural and religious nature of a society.

Singers and storytellers go from place to place in South India, performing for families or organizations. Tellers of epic stories like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, or stories about gods from the Puranas and Hindu myths emphasize the spiritual aspects. In villages, Bardic troupes recite epics about caste heroes, local gods, and saints. This demonstrates how traditional folklore and stories can captivate individuals of all ages. The fascinating stories vary from the Panchatantra to the Hitopadesha, and from Jataka to Akbar-Birbal. Not only that, but classic Indian epics like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, as well as works like The Bhagavad Gita, are full of didactic stories based on the lives of great individuals. While these are considered an epoch of legends, it is reasonable to characterize them as a collection of folktales that depict the essence of Indian history and socio-cultural expressions.

In addition to written literature, India has a long history of oral storytelling. These stories, passed down through generations, are frequently delivered by professional storytellers or griots who have memorised large volumes of folklore, myths, and legends. These oral storytelling traditions are an important element of India's cultural fabric, allowing stories to be shared and preserved in communities throughout the country.

2. THE RAMAYANA

The Ramayana is one of the most popular and well-known epics in Indian mythology, telling the story of Rama and his exploits. It is a story about valour, devotion, and the triumph of good over evil. The Ramayana has been passed down through the decades, enthralling audiences with timeless themes and larger-than-life characters.

3. THE MAHABHARATA

The Mahabharata, the world's longest epic, is a grand narrative that includes love, treachery, responsibility, and honour. It recounts the epic battle between the Pandavas and the Kaurvas, two lineages of a royal dynasty. The Mahabharata is not only a compelling story, but it also contains a wealth of philosophical and moral precepts. It is passed down from generation to generation using oral tradition.

4. KATHAS

Storytelling takes many various forms and mediums around the world. Storytelling, also known as Katha, has been a popular tradition in India since the Vedic period. Kathas are used to teach teachings, morality, and entertain audiences. Katha is an Indian storytelling tradition that can be religious or moral in nature. In Hinduism, kathas such as Bhagwat Purana, Satyanarayan Vrat, and Ram katha are often performed as rituals. India's rich culture leads to unique storytelling traditions in each region or state.

Some kathas are narrated using props such as puppets, masks, and even musical instruments. In India, storytelling, also known as Kathas, is deeply ingrained in the culture and daily life.

Storytelling through generations-

Storytelling, also known as katha, was used to express religious beliefs, caste structures, gender roles, and more. The classical Katha System aimed to define the divine powers and nature responsible for the universe. These ideas and customs persist over generations. In India, main katha traditions have given rise to various storytelling genres.

Kathas are classed into several forms and formats based on region, language, and art genre, such as:

1) Hari Katha
2) BURRA KATHA
3) Yakshagana
4) Kirtan

1) Hari Katha

This Hindu religious lecture draws from numerous sacred epics, religious characters, and saints. Harikatha showcased various forms of art, including dance, drama, music, and speech, based on religious vernaculars and Indian Vedic lifestyle. These forms arose mostly in South Indian states such as Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh.

Harikatha's various forms aimed to educate people on the concepts of good and evil, Karma, and devotion to God and religion. Hari Katha is said to have originated from Ajjada hamlet in Srikakulam, close coastal Andhra. Harikatha aimed to instill dedication and truthfulness in the public, guiding them towards self-awareness and upright behaviour. This not only entertained people, but also taught them about traditional values and religion.

Style, Origin and Transcription-

Harikatha was performed interactively using music, recitations, tales, and plots to convey the moral and idea of the story. The chief storyteller told the katha, which was then performed by co-members or sub-singers in a theatrical setting.

This style of commentary has spread throughout Southern India, with different connotations depending on the location. For example, in Tamil Nadu, it is known as 'Villupattu', meaning 'the song of the bow'. The teller is referred to as 'Pulavar-a poet in Tamil'. Villupattu is typically performed by a chorus, with the main singer holding an inverted bow.

In Andhra Pradesh, Bhajan and Kirtanas are generally known as Purana Pravachanas. The spectators are influenced by the effective telling of Puranic and Vedic stories. This tradition is still practiced across India under various names.

2) Burra Katha-

Similar to Hari Katha, this practice originated in Andhra Pradesh, a coastal region in South India. This katha is chanted in Telegu in a variety of formats. The Picchuguntla or Jangalu tribe imitates this custom in many forms and titles. Burrakatha narrators are known as Saradagallu and use a musical instrument called Tambura to perform. These tribes, consisting of 3-4 family members and comparable to nomads, perform Lord Shiva folklore at various locations. This tradition tells history through traditional music, singing, and narration.

The form is used to settle political disputes in the region.

3) Yakshagana-

Throughout history, Eternal Nature has been revered in one form or another. Yakshagana is a vivid and vibrant narrative technique. This evolved in the states of South India. Yaksa refers to nature spirits who protect the earth's hidden treasures.

4) Kirtan-

Kirtan, like other types of storytelling, is performed using Sanskrit shlokas.

Kirtan is a practice that promotes holiness and has a long tradition in India. Kirtan is a holy practice that uses chants and meditation music. Kirtan continues to serve as a symbol of universal authority in modern society. Kirtan, commonly practiced by yogis and soul seekers, promotes mental tranquilly and calmness.

5. NARRATIVES

Narratives are oral or written constructs of sequences that might be illusory or nonfictional. Narratives are conversational tactics. In literature, they can be viewed as strategies or methods of narrative to convey a common theme. Modern narratives are typically associated with written literature, as opposed to memory, tradition, myth, or oral epics.

Oral Narratives

In academic and popular culture, India is commonly associated with its classical traditions and culture. According to Stuart Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, India's traditional traditions have a unique harmony that can be both counterpoint and autonomous. Folk traditions include tales, ballads, rhymes, proverbs, songs, and rituals. These are examples of 'folklore'. According to Susan Wadley, spoken language is distinguished by its "concreteness," personal quality, emphasis on persons and actions, use of parallelism, paralinguistic aspects, and absence of complicated grammatical forms such as relative clauses.

Humans have been telling stories since time immemorial, and many have been recorded in writing. Oral narrative refers to the telling of a story using spoken words. Some stories were told before writing existed. The stories were passed down over generations. The stories read as if they were spoken or told by someone. They sound similar to the storyteller. Some oral stories were altered when written down. Oral narratives are most effective when the storyteller can be seen and heard. Artistic storytellers can bring oral narratives to life, such as Kissagoi in India. Traditional stories were not read, but rather performed by great storytellers who used body language and voice appropriate to the setting. Teejan Bai, who narrates Mahabharata stories in local language, is a skilled storyteller.

Malete (2010) argues that folk narratives are integral to our indigenous knowledge system and can aid in achieving our goals and ideals through development.

According to Ivethi (1982, 106), traditional narratives provide children with enjoyment, but for the elderly, they represent unfulfilled possibilities.

Folk stories provide insight into a society's underlying emotions, hopes, wants, beliefs, and worldview. Folk stories emerged in communities that did not have written language. Folk tales were not intended to be scientifically reported, but rather told in a straightforward manner. Folk tales maintain a consistent narrative and character throughout.According to functional theory, live storytelling in front of an audience is more important than the text itself. Teachers can utilise folk stories to teach pupils about a region's flora and wildlife, language, culture, traditions, cuisines, housing, and geography. Folk stories provide pupils with insights into their country's socio-cultural diversity and distinctiveness. Cosmogonies, folktales and fairy tales, legends, epics, Hawaiian wahi pana, ghost stories, jokes, ballads, chants, proverbs (wise sayings), and myths are examples of oral narratives and folklore. However, the terms "oral traditions" and "folklore" are not synonymous.

Folklore in the Indian Context

A.K. Ramanujan, a stalwart in the study of Indian folklore, contributed to the study by reconceptualising the discussion concerning "Great and Little Traditions". This notion, first created by Robert Redfield and later extended to India by Milton Singer in the 1950s and 1960s, proposed that a great civilisation, such as India, grew from local folk roots during the process of civilisation. Ramanujan defines folklore as one of various systems, languages, or registers that humans use. These systems—Sanskrit, classical literature, bhakti, and folklore—refer to one another and cannot be understood apart. Aside from this religious and mythological body of knowledge, oral communication manifested itself in folklore and related media such as ballads, proverbs, riddles, parables, superstitions, and beliefs.

The 1930s, when nationalist waves swept over India, were a watershed moment in the country's independence war. The nation was politically awakened, with the spirit of revolt and freedom permeating every village, town, and metropolis. Raja Rao, a pioneer of Indian-English writing, wrote his magnum opus novel, "Kanthapura" against this setting, which remains a striking example of our liberation warriors' perseverance and heroism to this day.

Kanthapura, published in February 1938, is still considered a seminal work in Indian English writing today. When Raja Rao's novel writing was inspired by Western literary limits and English ethos, he felt compelled to incorporate Indianness into his novels, even if they were written in a foreign language. Rao established a distinct image of Indian novel writing during a time when nationalism was on the rise in India, seamlessly blending parts of Western novel writing with India's vivid storytelling traditions, infusing the tale with the soul of Indian villages.

The work is set in the fictional village of Kanthapura and is written in the style of the Sthala Puranas, which are legends about Indian locales.The story unfolds through the eyes of Achakka, an older woman in the village who serves as a narrator, in the same way that grandparents tell their children stories and traditions from the past. Kanthapura is initially depicted as a caste-ridden and heavily segregated community, with separate housing places set aside for different communities, sustaining a sense of division among its inhabitants. It was there that people developed national and political consciousness, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principles.

Raja Rao employs classic methods such as puranas and mythology to establish a recognisable setting for the narrative. The author highlighted numerous tactics used to spread the national movement throughout the hamlet, such as "Harikatha" - the oral recital of Puranic myths. These stories frequently featured nationalist ideals as well. Puranic references connect the people to their ancient cultural history, offering a familiar environment in which to instill and transmit free-spirited values and aspirations. Jayaramachar, who sings Harikatha to the peasants, was brought there by Moorthy, who teaches the notion of Swaraj to them at the start of the story. He correlates Lord Shiva's three eyes with the three aspects of Swaraj: self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, and Khaddar.Even though the peasants were first hostile to these beliefs, as the narrative unfolds, we see that they all fully embrace and strive for the concept of Swaraj. In Kanthapura, where religion and culture were important, traditions were employed in a secular and political context to spread nationalist beliefs.

The narrator characterises Moorthy, the story's protagonist, as "like a noble cow, quiet, generous, serene, deferent and Brahminic," and as being adored by everyone. Moorthy is a devoted disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and a staunch advocate of his independence movement. He feels that Kanthapura village should be involved in the fight. Using the help of Harikatha-man "Jayaramachar," he presents Gandhi as the God Vishnu's reincarnation, convincing the people to embrace the Gandhian perspective. Because of this political awakening, villagers join Moorthy in his struggle and protest against the injustices committed by the colonisers. Moorthy preaches the value of "swaraj" while hopping from house to house. As he helps the villagers become self-sufficient and shares Gandhian ideas about non-violence, love, truth, and prejudice against marginalised people, he receives greater support. Kanthapura unites in the fight for independence and launches a number of protest marches and activities. Moorthy and several young men lead the development of a village Congress Committee. Congress establishes a corps unit whose job it is to teach followers how to always act nonviolently, even in the face of tyranny by the state. To express their disapproval of the treatment of Pariahs (coolies) at the nearby British plantation Skeffington Coffee Estate, Moorthy and his supporters organise a village gathering. They create a 'don't touch the government' movement and refuse to pay taxes. We observe opposing forces in the form of in opposition to the freedom movement. They refuse to pay taxes and launch a "don't touch the government" movement. Opposing forces to the liberation struggle are represented by personalities like as Bhatta, Bade Khan, and Waterfall Venkamma. In response, the government dispatches forces to Kanthapura, where they ruthlessly beat and shoot demonstrators, leaving thousands injured. Protesters lash out aggressively in response to the senseless shootings. The demonstrators are overpowered by the government and forced to flee, but before they can go, some of the women set fire to the village's cottages and established permanent homes in the next neighbourhood.

Jayaramachar attempts to blend politics and religion when narrating Mahatma Gandhi's tale as a Harikatha. By comparing Gandhi to Siva and Krishna, he raises Gandhi to a transcendental plane. He travels from village to village eradicating the serpent of foreign oppression, akin to Siva's three eyes and Gandhi's swaraj (self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unification, and spinning). The story of Harikatha relates to India's independence movement. The main myth of Kanthapura, which depicts the battle between the Mahatma and the British, is that of Ram, Sita, and Ravana. India is Sita, the British Raj is Ravana, and Ram is the Buddha.

The Indian narrative technique is shared by both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Without using any punctuation or prepositions, it tells an engaging story at the speed of Indian life. The strategy is appropriate for the topic. The grandmother relates the story and it reflects a generation that was impacted by exploitation, injustice, slavery, and a longing for independence, even though her English dialect differs from that of the British. The narrative of Kanthapura is tediously long. The most accurate representation of Indian sensibility can be found in the literal translation of proverbs, phrases, idioms, and images. The images are inspired by Indian mythology, folklore, historical occurrences, and natural phenomena.The all-encompassing nature of Indian religion is exemplified by the installation and consecration of the Linya, the Rama festival, the Krishna festival, and numerous other noteworthy public festivities and prayers that unite all aspects of Kanthapura life in one central location.

With the exception of the Ramayana, The Harikathas play a major part in the novel's intense mythology. In the beginning, Harikatha's in Kanthapura were performed by the local sastri, a learnt scholar and poet. He was a great Harikatha-man and a wonderful singer. Upon rising, the people perceived that God had brightened and approached the assembly with the bells at his ankles and the cymbals in his hands. He performed an excellent Harikatha of the Parvati vs. Siva incident. Afterwards, a Harikatha man from the city named Jayaramachar performed a recitation of Harikatha. Because he spoke of Mother India and her great sons rather than gods and goddesses, the narrator refers to him as a humorous Harikatha-man. If he told the tale of Siva and Parvati, he would explain that the nation's efforts to achieve freedom were symbolised by Parvati's penance. He would clarify that Swaraj is also three-eyed, with the three eyes representing Self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity, and the production and donning of Khadi. As a result, the three-eyed Siva would come to represent Swaraj. He would incorporate aspects of the nation and Swaraj into each Katha he performed. As a result, Jayaramachar juxtaposes the past and present in his Harikathas, and modern occurrences and figures are frequently associated with puranic deities and epic heroes and heroines. Nonetheless, the subject of his greatest Harikatha was Gandhi's birth. Through this Katha, he inspired his audience to feel patriotic and to have an unwavering confidence in Gandhi, which served as the independence fighters' greatest source of inspiration.

The village used Harikathas as a practice at the start of the book. Here, the word "Hari" itself signifies "God," referring to the tales of Vishnu and his incarnations. In Kanthapura, Sastri, a learnt scholar, singer, and poet, performed Harikathas. He narrates a Harikatha about the goddess Parvathi and Lord Siva, as well as how Parvathi defeated Lord Siva. Subsequently, Jayaramachar asked him to do Harikatha, which he did, basing it on Gandhi and his principles. He used to tell tales of Mother India and her valiant sons. In his Harikatha, he symbolises the nation's fight for independence as being represented by Goddess Parvathi and Swaraj as being represented by Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva's three eyes stand for unification, self-purification, and the creation and donning of khadi. Between his Harikatha,

Jayaramachar would bring the Indian circumstances, to combat Red-Men, to follow Mahatma's route, and to obtain Swaraj, in conjunction with gods and goddesses. He elevates Gandhi to the status of a god, for example, by equating his actions with a specific deed performed by Krishna. He demonstrates the Mahatma and Lord Krishna's congruence. Similar to how Lord Krishna destroys Serpent Kali, Mahatma eradicates foreign domination.

6. CONCLUSION

India's storytelling traditions reflect the richness and complexity of its cultural past. From ancient Sanskrit literature to modern literature and movies, storytelling has served as a medium of instruction, entertainment, and spiritual enlightenment. As India progresses, it is critical to conserve and nurture these traditions so that future generations can enjoy the wonder of Indian stories. Whether through the spoken word, the printed page, or the silver screen, storytelling continues to be a tremendous force for connecting people, transcending borders, and celebrating the human experience.

In Kanthapura, the oral tradition of Harikatha is used to unite people in the name of God. People use Harikatha Moorthy to conjure the spirit of a freedom fighter. He informed them that if they wanted to be free from the British, they might do spin charka, boycott foreign goods, follow non-violence, and other Gandhian principles. Moorthy uses oral tradition to gain freedom in Kanthapura

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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