CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Man and his Mind
Raja Rao is one of the greatest and widely acclaimed novelists who has made an indelible mark in the history of Indian English literature. He is remembered not only for the fictional writings he produced but also for the nuances in his writing skill, form, style and presentation. His novels are not only concerned with the stereotyped plot or themes like political, social, and religious, but also thematic subjects of varied interest like philosophical, metaphysical, religious and East-West encounters. He writes on subjects like Albigensian heresy, Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Marxism, Gandhism, Vedantism, Islam, with perfect ease. His encyclopaedic knowledge does bewilder the reader, for he discusses everything under the sun. Hence before analysing the literary climate prevailing at his time and the fictional works produced by Raja Rao, a brief biographical sketch of the author is given here.

Raja Rao, the eldest among his two brothers and seven sisters, was born on November 5, 1908 at Hassan, a small town in Mysore State now known as Karnataka. He was named 'Raja' as he narrates in an interview published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India,*\(^1\) on account of his

specially privileged birth which took place when the then Maharaja of Mysore was standing at the door of his house and his father was receiving the Maharaja in a ceremonial way. He was born in a very orthodox Brahmin family surrounded by the culture and rituals of the Brahmins.

It was this family environment of orthodoxy which shaped his mind and presented him as we see him. Moreover, Raja Rao's own grandfather was a learned scholar and his close association with his grandfather in his days of childhood at Hassan became his chief place of learning spiritual and philosophical thoughts. Raja Rao chose Brahmin protagonists for all his four novels written so far, chiefly because he had studied and experienced much of this highest and the holiest caste of Hindus. More so, he presented the vision of India and the Indian tradition through the portrayal of his Brahmin protagonists. The Brahmins have been the custodians of highest learning and also the spiritual guides of the earliest society of the civilised world. It is they who show the path of deliverance to the common people. Since the Brahmins are held in high esteem in society, Raja Rao chooses a Brahmin hero in each of his novels to represent the best of the Indian traditions and cultures.

A part of the childhood of Raja Rao was spent in Harihalli, a village, where his family owned some land. It was these impressions of the village life that he had
gathered during those years which went into the making of the thematic texture of his first novel *Kanthapura*. He has in this novel depicted different facets of village life and the life of the rustics. It is so naturally presented that it can only be the work of a genius who has experienced it personally and with a strong command of the language has been able to draw realistic and living characters as well as the natural scenic beauty of the village of Kanthapura. Raja Rao's father was employed as a teacher in Nizam's College at Hyderabad, thus, the former was admitted in Salar Jung's Madarsae - Aliya for his school education. He was a versatile genius possessing first hand knowledge of all philosophical and religious systems of the world, got there an opportunity to learn the Muslim theology which was further enriched by his stay at the Muslim University, Aligarh, where he did his matriculation. In Aligarh he came in contact with Eric Dickenson who initiated him into love for France and the French language. He graduated in the year 1928 from Nizam's College, Hyderabad, which was then affiliated to the Madras University. He then proceeded to France for research in 'Mysticism of the West', though soon he drifted to literature.

At the age of nineteen he went to Europe, researching in literature at the University of Montpellier and at the Sorbonne. It was at the age of twenty and
still studying at the University of Montpellier he got married to Camille Mouly—a professor of French and a great lover of Hindu tradition and culture. Soon this marriage led to a mutually consented divorce in 1949, and one can easily discern the thematic approach of marriage and divorce between Ramaswamy and Madeleine in his novel, The *Serpent and the Rope*. In 1931 Raja Rao shifted to the University of Paris where he researched on ‘The Influence of India on Irish Literature’ under the guidance of Professor Cazamian for about two years. Since the early sixties he has made the United States of America his second home and has delivered lectures for years at the University of Texas. In 1972 he was chosen Fellow of Woodrow Wilson International for Scholars, Washington, D. C.

To the Westerners, Raja Rao appeared as a traditional Indian scholar of the old school or a veritable learned orientalist while he appeared to his countrymen as a cosmopolitan expatriate who within his heart had nursed true love for India and Indian values. It cannot be denied that he left India with a sense of disgust because his intellectual and spiritual thirst pining for the attainment of higher truths was not quenched here. Thus he went to the West. But when disappointed not to find France a land of Truth retrieved to Indian thought and spiritual ideas for solace. This feeling of an expatriate can be said to be the basis of his novel *Comrade Kirillov*. Thus this
combination of the orientalist patriot and the cosmopolitan occidentalist enabled Raja Rao to depict in his magnum opus, *The Serpent and the Rope*, the culture of Europe for the Indian readers as forcefully as he presented Indian life and values for the Western audience. He has tried to show the reactions of the characters belonging to two different cultural roots of life style and thinking when they interact as human beings. Raja Rao has fulfilled the mission of a cultural ambassador of India to the West and interpreted the Indian tradition and thought in a Western medium of expression which has been widely acclaimed in India as well as abroad. Although he was far from his country, as far as France and England, his heart still held the strong invisible strings of his traditional Hindu culture. All that he expresses speaks of his Indianness-love for his country (India), pride in being an Indian, and signs of sorrow at the loss of the true character of the Indian values whether they be moral, religious, spiritual or social.

The metaphysical interpretation of his vision of India in a fictional form is a remarkable achievement of Raja Rao which he has undertaken and emerged successful. As the reader goes through the novels he will notice that a new form of fiction writing has been introduced. Much has been left for the reader to interpret and fill in the gaps in accordance with one's understanding of the subject
matter. Paragraph after paragraph can be read with avidity of finding something new but never can the reader be a passive, dull spectator, for he is ever engrossed in enacting the role of one character or the other. In portraying the multifarious characters of various multitudes Raja Rao is able to present Indian culture before the English reading public in India and abroad. He has paid homage not only to India but England too by giving her a unique variety of Indian English to add to her treasures. The Indianised words and phrases in the English language as well as the framework of his novels is indeed a landmark in the Indian writing in English.

George Steiner is of the opinion that there is a decline in the story-telling in the modern novels, except for a few like "Henry James, Proust, Joyce could have kept a railway-carriage entertained on a long journey. Raja Rao however belongs to James and Proust to the symbolist and surrealist novel tradition ... Raja Rao's approach to the art of the novelist is poetic. He lays great stress on style, on conveying the story by means of deliberate verbal devices - many of them unusual ones". Sometimes even the best critics, equipped fully with

the technique fail miserably in their novel writing to interpret and represent the true life pattern.

After the publication of Kanthapura an interval of nearly a decade in writing is noticed. As Raja Rao told E. M. Forster:

I had not written a book for ten years because of my study of metaphysics.  

Throughout his writings a metaphysical approach to the problems of life, political, moral or spiritual acts as a keynote. It is this special approach which enables him to view things in their temporal and spiritual framework and gives it a concrete shape in the form of novels.

The Gandhian impact was spread over a span of twenty seven years i.e. 1920 to 1927 and the whole nation was under the spell of the Gandhian philosophy. The emergence of Gandhi upset all the then prevailing political strategies and ushered in fresh ideas and methods which effectively changed Indian life in every sphere of life. Speaking about Gandhi, Nehru in his much acknowledged book,

The Discovery of India wrote that:

Gandhi was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths. 4

Gandhiji launched his non-violence, Non-Co-Operation movement with great success as his leadership had already assumed an all-India character. Thus Gandhiji’s appearance on the social and political scene gave birth to a new era called ‘The Gandhian Golden Era.’ His philosophy in fact, initiated the people into new hopes and inspired them with a fresh approach of confidence to fight for freedom. The unshakeable faith nurtured in the hearts of the Indians and a strong determination with which they followed the Gandhian philosophy, the political and social conditions of the country paved the way and compelled Britain to concede independence to India on 15 August, 1947.

The sudden outburst of a new life-stream was felt in political, economic, religious, educational and social life which bears the stamp of the Gandhian thoughts. On the political scene after Independence though Gandhiji’s crusade for the Hindu-Muslim Unity was launched, yet the Muslim separatists led to the partition of India and formed Pakistan.

In the social sphere, the women who adhered and tended to only hearth and hoe and lived in purdah,
responded wholeheartedly to Gandhi's call. Women participating in political mass movement, marching in demonstrations, facing lathi-charges and courting jails was indeed a unique spectacle witnessed in the Gandhian Era. The formation of various associations and organisations was responsible to look into women's education and emancipation under the banner of Gandhian Movement. Besides, the transformation and upliftment of the women folk, the eradication of untouchability too, was included in this programme.

On the economic scene, industrialisation became the foreword. The emergence of various industries changed the life of the Indians. Modern modes of transport facilities led to the birth of many modern cities which became the seat of modern culture thus increased democratic social life. These changes brought about a progressive change in social, political and economic spheres also.

Gandhian philosophy with its repercussions on political, social and economic spheres did not let Indian English Literature go untouched. The flowering of the novels in the thirties achieved new heights just as juxtaposed with the Gandhian movement which enjoyed a strong position.

Gandhiji's sole aim was not only to attain Freedom but also to put an end to the economic degradation,
removal of social inequalities, eradicate abuses like untouchability and caste differences, bring about a reform in education and give new life to language and literature. Hence, the distinctive change on an overall basis of this era and the prominent role played by Gandhiji, had rightly earned the name of 'Gandhi's Golden Era' or 'Gandhian Golden Decade'. India was undoubtedly undergoing metamorphic changes.

The modern Indian literature began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy who wrote in Bengali and English, Lokmanya Tilak in Marathi and English, Sri Aurobindo in Bengali and English, likewise, Gandhiji, the Saviour of the downtrodden masses though not a prolific writer made an attempt and wrote in Gujarati and English. Such was the influence of Gandhiji's writings that creative writing in various languages flourished as never before during the twenties. He was not a scholar but his writings reflected his real inner self and character which was simple, explicit and direct. Gandhiji's writings were in contrast to his earlier writers whose works were heavy, ornate and complex.

The scene which concentrated on the urban sophistication now shifted to the rural one. Other forms of writings fail to register any great stride taken in the direction of the literary scene except prose which showed a steady progress and had explored new vistas and produced a
number of notable works before and during the Gandhian Era.

More enlightened and matured writings of Gandhiji were contributed only after 1915, though his first major work, *Hind Swaraj* was launched in 1909 in Gujarati and 1910 in English. *Hind Swaraj*, says John Middleton Murray is "One of the spiritual classics of the world" and "the greatest book that has been written in modern times". His two well known journals are *Young India* (1919-32) and *Harijan* (1933-48). Gandhiji has written on various issues like social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual. The most outstanding work is his autobiography *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* in two volumes which is translated by Mahadev Desai in 1927 and 1928 respectively.

As already noted the Gandhian upsurge greatly influenced the writers of the Indian English novel. The first to cite is K. S. Venkataraman whose novels, *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932) could have been written only after the emergence of Gandhi on the Indian scene. In both the novels Gandhian economics and politics have been broadly discussed through the characters, Murugan and Kandan respectively. Even his novel

The Next Rung (1928) which is a critique of modern civilization shows a strong influence of Gandhi’s ideals. Another noted novelist is Krishnaswamy Nagarajan who wrote novels like Athavar House in 1939, Cold Rice in 1945 and Chronicles of Kedaram in 1961. In his first novel he portrays a South Indian district town in the 1930’s. The theme in Nagarajan’s later novel is the town of Kedaram where the conflicts are between the old and the new, the Hindus and the Muslims, the Brahmins and non-brahmins and also the feud between the two Iyengar sects – the tengalai and the vadakalai. The Iyenger faction is the centre around which the entire story revolves and Mahatma Gandhi is brought into the scene to put an end to the tension. When Gandhiji’s intervention unites the two Iyenger sects a clear Congress victory could be envisaged. Nagarajan is a good story-teller and the entire novel is humorous, yet, it has the consistent truth in it. His novels in fact prove superior to those of Venkataramani. The ferment caused by the Gandhian age for reform is more forcefully presented in Nagarajan’s novels. But a landmark in the Indian English Writing is reached with the appearance of the trio, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. Each one’s work is exclusive and consists of its own individualities explored in the various possibilities of Indian fiction.

So far the writer’s concentration was centred
around the Gandhian impact and its influences on the works without actually making the Mahatma play a character role. Mulk Raj Anand was indeed the pioneer to make the Mahatma play a role in the novel Untouchable written as early as 1933 shows Bakha, a young sweeper, who hears Gandhi making a speech but has no personal contact with him. The other novel is The Sword and the Sickle (1924) in which Lal Singh, a revolutionary does have an interview with Gandhiji and is highly impressed to hear him express his opinion and ideas regarding the fight for emancipation from the clutches of the British. Lal fights for the peasants but towards the end he is sent to jail. Similarly, R. K. Narayan in his novel which appeared in 1955, Waiting for the Mahatma made Gandhi play an important role.

The youngest of the three, Raja Rao was not a prolific writer like his predecessors. In spite of his small corpus of literary output he is acclaimed as a great writer of fiction the world over. He has just four novels to his credit, chronologically they are Kanthapura (1938), The Serpent and the Rope (1960); Sahitya Akademi award, 1963), The Cat and Shakespeare (1965) and finally Comrade Kirillov (1976). All his novels contain an indirect discussion about the Mahatma’s teaching, preaching and philosophies, but it is only in his first novel Kanthapura where Gandhiji’s ideals have been dealt with strongly. Moorthy, the protagonist of this novel, is a college
student who has only a vision of the Mahatma and is so
enticed that he decides to become a Gandhi-man at once and
sincerely defend and carry out the Gandhian philosophy.
Rangamma, the old woman, is the narrator of this dramatic
tale which is a typical traditional folk form, the Puranas
of India. The idealism, the violence and agony comprise the
Gandhian Age.

Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* (1957)
gives a picture of the later Gandhian Age covered by the
'Quit India' movement of the early forties. The writers
were very much under the influence of Gandhi's teaching
and personality, but Raja Rao alone has succeeded more
than Narayan, Anand, Kamala Markandaya and others by
probing the depths of the national upsurge and by fusing it
with the traditional religious faith in his novel
*Kanthapura*. Narayan has failed to depict the Freedom
Movement effectively for lack of profundity and
evocativeness in *Waiting for the Mahatma*. The impact is
felt only by Sriram, an individual, but in *Kanthapura* the
impact of the Freedom Movement is felt throughout the novel
by each and everyone. Markandaya too has failed as she has
lost much of the movement in her novel *Some Inner Fury* by
her trite handling of the East-West encounter.

Other writers inspired by the Gandhian
Movement were Bhabani Bhattacharya who wrote about the
Bengal famine in *So Many Hungers*, Lambert Mascarenhas
wrote about Goa's struggle for liberation in *Sorrowing Lies My Land* and Nayantara Sehgal's *A Time to be Happy* are worthy of being read.

It can be concluded that the Age of Gandhi consisted of spiritual values and a social and political awareness among the people. Gandhiji has repeatedly laid stress on moral and spiritual values rather than on material advancement. For more than sixty years Gandhiji is the centre of biographies and expository studies.

The impact of Gandhi from time to time is noticed in the novels written during the 1930 onwards. The spirit of the Mahatama is spread over all the works of that period. Even Raja Rao, the subject of the present study, too, is highly influenced by the teaching of Gandhi, hence giving birth to the much acclaimed novel *Kanthapura*. In short it can be said that the Gandhian Golden decade witnessed revolutionary changes in social, economic and political institutions.

After a short study of the literary climate of the 1930's and the repercussions it had on the writers of that period, it would be appropriate to study the writings of Raja Rao in the chronological order.

Raja Rao had four novels and a collection of short stories to his credit. The novels include *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and last but not the least his *Comrade*
Kirillov (1976) compose a quartet. Each novel deals with a particular area of human experience and spiritual and metaphysical phase through which the novelist passes. Raja Rao strikes a similar chord in his, another novel The Chessmaster and His Moves which is published in 1988. This voluminous novel deals with a variety of themes.

The first novel shows Raja Rao's own experience infused in the protagonist Moorthy, a young man full of vigour and zeal who enthusiastically accepts challenges in life. In life, Raja Rao too in experimenting with new form and style readily accepts challenges. Kanthapura is a sthala-purana in form and the narration is in a folk-epic style of the Puranas, of India. The novel is an account of primitivistic social, political and religious activities of the rural folks. The sleepy village of Kanthapura is suddenly awakened and it bursts into action when the Gandhian Freedom Movement creeps in.

An intermission of a score and two years followed after writing Kanthapura. There appeared The Serpent and the Rope, a Mahapurana, on the literary scene. This magnum opus won him the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1963 for his mastery in handling the various complexities of man and the other values which make living meaningful. It is the philosophical profundity, his experimentation of form and style, descriptive power, lyrical beauty and symbolic descriptions that marks his work as a major achievement.
Raja Rao, an indefatigable experimenter, undoubtedly, in acceptance of challenges won for himself a niche which is solely his. It is this dazzling performance of Raja Rao which brought his long neglected novel Kanthapura to light.

Apart from his philosophical leanings Raja Rao attempted to write a metaphysical comedy, The Cat and Shakespeare. In this comic novel he professes at length the marjara-nyaya or the Cat-hold theory. This fable consists of fantasy, reality, mysticism and symbolism and provides the reader with lots of humour and laughter.

Comrade Kirillov is a novel of slender bulk dealing with the quest for truth. It is said to be the continuation of the philosophy of self-knowledge in The Serpent and the Rope, the theory of self-surrender in The Cat and Shakespeare and finally the philosophy of Truth in Comrade Kirillov. The last novel also expresses the complexity of character of his protagonist Padmanabha Iyer (Kirillov) an Indian expatriate.

Among Raja Rao's short stories there appeared a collection under the title The Cow of the Barricades in 1947. But in 1978 with a few more additions the collection of short stories was published entitled The Policeman and the Rose. The creative craftsmanship of Raja Rao's mind is as strongly at work in short stories as in his major novels. Stories like Jayni and Akkaya figure domestic tragedies while The Little Gram Shop shows human
degradation and brutality. The Cow of the Barricades symbolises India under the British rulers while India-A Fable is made up of fact and fancy or fantastic with metaphysical. Other stories under such themes are Companions, In Khandesh and Kanakpala, Protector of Gold. The Policeman and the Rose deals with similar themes as dealt in The Serpent and the Rope as well as The Cat and Shakespeare.

Raja Rao truly is a genius and it is his prized technical experimentation and innovation that has earned him the status of a creative writer of Indian fiction in English today. For the purpose of evaluation in this present study only four novels of Raja Rao have been considered for an analytical and critical study.