CHAPTER V

LOCAL LEGEND
'Kanakapala' and 'Companions' have metaphysical connotation that characterises the Raja Rao canon. A snake appears in both the stories. Mostly these two stories run like a fable. While in 'Kanakapala' the snake is suggestive of the false values which erode man's moral beliefs. In 'Companions' it becomes a symbol of man's potentiality for spiritual liberation attainable through self-purification.

Kanakapala, protector of Gold in the story acquires mythological significance in that

"he lives with you, guarding your riches, protecting your health, and making you holy". ¹

Lord Naga as we read in the myth, doesn't hesitate to be guided by the magicians.

Old Venkamma living in Kashipura, narrates the story. The village Kashipura takes us back to the worthless descendants of vision house plot against the life of their own brother Seetharam, who is reluctant to dig out the gold which their ancestors had offered to Gods.

¹. 'Kanakapala', p.1.
Vision Rangappa set out on pilgrimage to Kashi. On the way he stopped in a village on the banks of Hemavathy. Soon he had a dream vision of Kashi Visweswara who announced thus:

"The pilgrimage is over but on the top of the hill before thee raise unto us a temple ... their duty to look after the temple".  

The pilgrimage had reached fulfilment even before Rangappa reached Kashi.

Soon, we come know that the spiritual values of Rangappa have been replaced by the mean secular values of his unworthy progeny who try to steal the secret treasure that had been consecrated as Gods. Their attempts are foiled by Kanakapala a cobra, with a jewel in its lying always tame but ever vigilant, harming none even when provoked and dying in the end with a sense of neglected duty.

The story is,

"replete with popular superstitions".  

2. 'Kanakapala', p.3.  
Such as that the snake can be a friend or an enemy to man. These details provided with the necessary backdrop and create the right atmosphere. The old woman who narrates the story is a neighbour and also the third cousin of the family whose tragic history she narrates. The story acquires authenticity with the belief in the religion and faith in the God of the old woman. This belief of the old woman can become the belief of any old woman in a village.

Venkamma abhors the unrighteous brothers of the vision house. The woman laments over the lack of values in society. Naturally, she becomes meditative and tells the readers that a curse has fallen on the village. Naturally it becomes barren.

Raja Rao creates the right Indian sensibility in that he uses swear words that dwell upon the rural beliefs and curses on the irreligious folks. Name calling also becomes a part of the Indian sensibility. More over the rural scenery provides the necessary backdrop to this mythical narration.

* * *
Raja Rao's another powerful story 'Companions' has metaphysical theme in that the epigraph,

"Alas till now I did not know
My guide and Fate's guide are woman". 4

This shows that it is only God who guides all. The story is about Moti Khan a basket maker, who with his companion snake, is in search of salvation. Moti Khan caught the snake while going through the woods of Rampur.

The snake was a learning brahmin in the previous birth and he was chased for his covetousness. He had to atone for his sin. Naturally he became a snake and started searching for truth. Moti Khan who is under the influence of a concubine too renounces his carnal desire and searches for truth. Thus, Moti Khan and the serpent became close because of their spiritual endeavour. In his dream Moti Khan hears from the snake that they are destined to renew their unfulfilled quest in mutual companionship.

4. 'Companions', p.29.
The scene of action is Fatehpur where Moti Khan brought the snake. Moti Khan who encounters the snake in the forest of Rampur receives the narration from the snake. In fact, the story runs like a fantasy. The snake was Pandit Srinath Sastry who was offered two boons. By the Goddess Lakshmmamma he asked for

"A bagful of gold and a liberation from the cycle of birth and death".  

The Goddess immediately gave him gold with a curse that he would be born a serpent in his next life. With the result, Pandit Srinath became a juggler's serpent. The juggler will be the vehicle of your salvation. The snake is supposed to perform:

"like a bird amidst shrieking children, only to sewing round their legs and to swing out to the amusement of them all, when you have climbed old men's shoulders and hung down them chattering like a squirrel, when you have thrust your hood at the virgin and circled round the marrying couples".

5. 'Companions', p.29.
These lines show how the snake is supposed to expiate of his sins along with the juggler.

Moti Khan left his concubine and walked towards northwards. At every village men came to offer to Moti Khan and women came to offer milk to the serpent. The snake too converted the lives of people into sweet homes. Children became free from fevers and poxes. Old men slept better after the touch of the snake. Plague went and plenty came. Moti Khan continued his journey without touching silver which means death.

The Satan in Moti Khan roused him to do evil. He told the snake that he was in love with a woman. But the snake gave a piece of advice to Moti Khan. Soon a call for prayer was given. Moti Khan fell on his knees and bent himself in prayer.

At Fatehpur Sikri Moti Khan wanted to stay and offer prayers at Chisti's stone. He even cried out in utter dejection:

"What is this Fate has sent me? This serpent is a very wicked thing. He just hisses and spits fire at every wink and waver .....
Now tell me, Sheikh Chisti, how can I find him? Till I find him I will not leave this spot".  

These lines show the utter disillusionment of Moti Khan in his search for Truth.

Moti Khan continues his search for Truth. He remains at the dargah of Sheikh Chisti and prayers of twenty nine days. One fine morning Chisti wakes from the stone to bless his devotee, gives him eyes to discern God and asks him to marry his daughter.

After the marriage, Moti Khan settles down at Fatehpur and lives the rest of his life guarding the tomb of Sheikh Chisti. His involvement in life through marriage has qualified by his non-attachment. He has become an enlightened one. He said:

"Sheikh Chisti, I am in a strange world. But there is a darker world I see behind, and beyond that dark, dark world, I see a brighter world, and these, there must be Allah".  

7. 'Companions', p.33.  
8. 'Companions', p.33.
This passage throws light on the enlightenment of Moti Khan.

One day Moti Khan's wife died and was buried in a tomb of black marble. Eleven months later Moti Khan died and he was given a white marble tomb. After three days the serpent also died and it was given a nice clay tomb.

Emperors and kings went away. They never destroyed the tombs of Moti Khan and snake. Thus, the story ends with the comments made by the narrator.

"Between Agra and Fatehpur Sikri you may still find the little tomb and the Pipal. Boys have written their names on the walls and dust and leaves cover the gold and blue of the pall. But some one has dug a well by the side, and if thirst takes you on the road, you can take a drink and rest under the Pipal, and think deeply of God". 9

The two stories - 'Kanakapala' and 'Companions' have a snake at the centre of action. In 'Kanakapala' the snake does not allow gold to be taken away by others.

9. Ibid., p.35.
In 'Companions' it gives a piece of advice to man to encounter his passion to reach God. These two run as they are legends or myths. But they are fraught with metaphysical concerns.

Any westerner wanting to know about India may read these stories and equip himself with the knowledge of Indian ethos, sensibility, superstitions, beliefs and their placid living.