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### METAPHYSICAL WAYS OF LIVING IN ON THE GANGA GHAT

**Dr. Bashisth Choubey**

Principal , Smt. Radha Bai Sarda Arts, Commerce and Science College ,  
Anjangaon Surji, Amravati (MS).

#### ABSTRACT

Raja Rao is one of the greatest Indian English novelists who believed that 'inspiration is wonderful when it happens, but the writer must develop an approach for the rest of the time. He knew that it is only by following your deepest instinct that you can lead a rich life.

**KEY WORDS:** Indian English novelists , 'inspiration.

#### INTRODUCTION :

Raja Rao, the eldest among his two brothers and seven sisters, was born on November 8, 1908<sup>1</sup> at Hassan, a small town in Mysore State now known as Karnataka. In 'The Illustrated Weekly of India'<sup>2</sup> he narrated how he was named 'Raja' in the presence of the then Maharaja of Mysore. He was born in an orthodox Brahmin family. He devoted himself to the pursuit of what he calls 'Truth' It was in 1938 that he published his classic novel *Kanthapura*, that established him as a novelist at the age of 30. His first novel *Kanthapura* gives the readers not only the aesthetic pleasure, but it stimulates their interest further in Indian English Literature.

Raja Rao next published some important non-fiction works. '*Changing India: An Anthology* (1939)', '*Whither India ?* (1948) both edited with Iqbal Singh, and Jawaharlal Nehru's '*Soviet Russia : Some Random Sketches and Impressions*' (1949), which he edited. His next work of fiction was a remarkable collection of short stories written in the 1930s, published as *The Cow of the Barricades and Other Stories* (1947). His second novel *The Serpent and the Rope* was published in 1960. The famine of 1942 provided him a setting for his next novel *The Cat and the Shakespeare :A Tale of Modern India* which was published in 1965. His next novel was *Comrade Kirillov* which was published in 1976. His next great novel, *The Chess master` and His Moves* (1988), won him the Neustadt Prize. His second collection of stories *The Policeman and the Rose and Other Stories* was published in 1978 and after eleven years his third collection of stories was published titled *On the Ganga Ghat* (1989). The present paper examines the metaphysical ways of living in this collection.

The world of Rao's stories in *On the Ganga Ghat* is very interesting. The collection has a broad canvas of river Ganga at the backdrop. Among Lord Shiva's beneficent roles is that of distributor of the seven holy rivers. The Ganga which winds round Brahma's city on Mount Meru in the Himalayas, descends from the mountains in great torrents. Lord Shiva, in order to break the fall, stands beneath the waters, which wind their way through his matted locks and divide into seven, the holy rivers of India. Ganga was the eldest daughter of Himavan and Mena. She was married to the gods and remained in heaven until she was brought



down to earth through the efforts of Bhagiratha, the grandson of Sagara, King of Ayodhya. Ever since she flows from heaven, through earth and into the ocean and Patala, Ganga is said to water the three worlds.

Varanasi, the sacred place for the Hindus, is on the confluence of river *Varuna* and *Asi* on the west bank of holy Ganga. It is one of the oldest cities in the world. Even in the 'Upanishads', the name of Kashi had been mentioned. According to the 'Purana', 1200 B.C. Kashya the son of Suhortro founded this city. From Kashya it was named Kashi. Later Varna, the King of Kashi set up an image of Devi Varanasi and from which Kashi got its new name Varanasi. In the middle age it was under the control of Kanauj for some time. Later it went under the possession of the Pal kings of Bengal. Then the Muslims captured it. Alauddin Khiji and Aurangzeb destroyed many temples of Kashi. The Vishwanth Temple of Kashi or Varanasi is a very sacred place to the Hindus. The people believe that among all the pilgrims centres of the world the Ganga of 'Kashi Khanda' is the holiest. The 'Purana' says that by residing beside the river Ganga one can be free from the bondage of this mortal world.

To drink the holy water of the Ganga is as good as the result of 'Ashwamedh Yajna'. And to pass three nights on the bank of Ganga is to save oneself from the sufferings of the 'Naraka' (the hell). So the pilgrims throng around the steps of the Ganga to have a holy bath.

Like Rome, Varanasi (Benares) or Kashi is traditionally regarded as "an eternal city", surviving through the ages. Lord Shiva, under his name Vishwanath or the Overlord of the world, is believed to be presiding deity of the town. According to a common belief, those who die here will be close to God in the other world, and many orthodox Hindus come to Varanasi to pass their last days. Since time immemorial, Benares has served not merely as a holy centre of pilgrimage but also as a great seat of traditional Hindu learning and culture.

There are ten stories in '*On the Ganga Ghat*' and Raja Rao in a brief explanatory note clears that "these stories are so structured that the whole book should be read as one single novel." Ragini Ramachandra has rightly says.

"The first and the last cannot be categorized as 'stories,' for they are more appropriately speculations, meditations on cause and effect, action and reaction and life's mysterious and incomprehensible ways reflected in some fundamental and unanswerable questions that the novelist poses to himself"(186)

In tale- 1 Raja Rao writes, "Life is so mysterious" ( *On the Ganga Ghat* 11). He narrates how the Mughal Sarai coolies are the wisest men in the world. They are lucky to see more humanity than at any other station.

"Five hundred million Hindus are their clients, and not just that: their ancestors have come too, to this same Benares, life after life, and thus have established a pilgrim link between man and man."(p.11)

These coolies carry beddings, night jars, canes - sometimes they even carry the ashes of the dead. The job of the coolies is to serve the pilgrims. They do it honestly. The tale ends with these words:

"Event is always single, simple  
Event is action without object." (16)

This tale narrates how the unreal and the real are so co-adjacent in Benares.

Tale 2 narrates the story of Bhim and his wife Rupvati who have lived there for many years. Bhim is a parrot whose voice is not human nor is it that of a bird. The tale describes Krodha (a vulture) as 'a tame old thing' who is too old to catch a fish. The social traits of the vultures are described with minute details:

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“The vultures of the right do not eat with the vultures of the left-there are strict rules not only about eating but mating.”(22)

The vultures are great observers of the law. The sparrows follow the pilgrims sometimes and return by evening to their nest soon the Dasi Ghat or the Hanuman Ghat side. The Benares Sparrows are fearless. The tale ends with the description of the tragic death of the bird. Bhim falls into the pyre of Swami Siddheshwarji and dies. This tale also narrates that in the Bindu House you can hear the snore of the parrot. Yes, the parrots snore like men. How strange it is !

Tale - 3 features Chhota Munna Lal, a young vendor of firewood for the burning ghat of Benares, Jamnalal is the name of his boss who has three children. The dogs of Benares come with you a short distance as you go toward the burning ghat. Chhota Munna Lal is also called Madhobha who is well informed on all that happens on the Benares ghats. The art of arranging firewood for a pyre is a difficult one, but Madhobha knows the art very well.

Madhobha does not believe that he is virtuous. On Saturdays he goes to the Maruthi temple. Munna Lal meets a Mohini in his room; she is perhaps in ‘apsara’s’ figure, who comes through the mirror to sing and dance. She expresses her love for Madhobha and likes the way he worships God Hanuman. Madhobha worships her in his heart. Life is so easy for him. He is simple by nature and so he guides people. Sometimes he sits by the pyre and weeps with the dead relations. Characterization of Munna Lal is superb.

Tale 4 is a story of Muthradas of Vrindavan who sold his camels and came to die in Benares. He adopted his second cousin’s son Moti Chand. Moti Chand was found one morning in the gutter by a prostitute’s house. Muthradas married him off but that brought hardly any change. He eloped with a brahmin pilgrim to Delhi. He came after some years and died a few years later living behind his widow. Muthradas’s wife was killed in a bus accident. He left his daughter-in-law and her adopted son and came to Benares with his cloth bundle and his Ramayana.

In Benares he started reading philosophical books. In the afternoon he went to hear the Ramayana. This virtuous man died and ‘the four-shoulder brahmins took his last procession to the ghats.’

“Man goes where he has to go but one day he will arrive where there’s no going or returning.” (44)

Muthradas’s last journey was peaceful. He died in Benares as he knew that the nature of deep sleep is beyond comprehension.

Tale 5 is a story of Bhedia and Jhaveri Bai. Jhaveri Bai is ‘a gentle and civilized’ cow. She does not go and steal. She just stands in front of a shop as if requesting, ‘Will you honour me ?’ she likes to lick Bhedia when Bhedia stands before her. In a moment of quiet Jhaveri Bai licks Bhedia with a love that would move men. Rao says, “The cow’s tears are pure than your brahmin prayers.”

Tale 6 is about Shanker who has a mathematical bent of mind and equates ‘zero’ (shunya) with the Ganga. “Zero is Ganga, Ganga is zero,” he shouts as if it is a Vedic mantra. The Ganga is a giver of Gifts. She gives limbs to the brave, paddle push to the boat, and child to the wife. He decides to name his child “E=MC.<sup>2</sup>”<sup>5</sup>

Tale 7 is of Bhola who is from Rajgarh, district Ghazipur. His father Goraknath pany cook Vishwanath read out the holy story of ‘Ramayana’ to the assembled soldiers at the camp fire. Their reading is so effective that the people weep, thinking on the suffering of Sita in exile. On the plains of Flanders he learns the ‘Shiva Stotra’ by heart. He never tells a lie. For him life is so simple: God gives when He gives. Bhola’s mother, wife and the child die of cholera. Mother Ganga represents the Absolute Truth for Bhola. Bhola’s story has three parts-birth, marriage and death. He accepts that God himself is a potter.

Tale 8, narrates the plight of Rani Rasomati. A radiant and moving description of Raja Protapachandra Mozumdar’s palace is simply brilliant. Rani Rasomati has blessings from Ma Ananda Mayee.

At the age of eighty five Rani Rasomati is not visited by anyone. The accountant Munna Lai looks after the charities. "She felt no evil against anyone. She felt no love either."(92) She waits for death lonely.

Tale 9 is about Shivalal, who lives with his brother, who is a cook to the Dholpur Station master. Once Shivalal feeds a Sadhu who suddenly appears on the railway station bench. Shivalal and the Sadhu, after many wanderings, come to Benares. Shivalal soon understands that, it is not easy to serve the Sadhu, who needs 'Bhang' for the hookah. He decides to leave the Sadhu and wanders aimlessly through the Benares streets. A woman brings him at her home. From that day onwards Shivalal stays in that house. Very soon he is familiar with the narrow alleys of Benares. The Sadhu has given Shivalal a mantra, which protects him from evil. The mantra gives him power over desire. He sings hymns morning and evening. The tale ends with a description of the celebration of Divali. Shivalal along with the Sadhu tears all the currency notes except a few hundred rupee ones and offers it to Mother Ganga.

Tale 10 narrates the search of a jeweller from Bombay for his daughter Ranchoddoss, the jeweller finds Sudha, his daughter in Benares and he also lives in Benares. They live happily in Benares. Sometimes real and earnest questions are asked to Sudha by a Bombay professor or Kathiawari aristocrat.

"Sudha is happy. Ranchoddoss as you see is proud and happy. You can still see him sit on the bank of the Ganges, as the evening begins to fall."(121)

The last tale depicts Ganga as the Mother of compassion. It begins with -"The power of man is to sow, the birth of woman to reap."(p.122) Raja Rao requests Mother Ganga to flow at the end. "Water is just water. So, O, Mother Ganga, please be gracious, and, --flow". (P. 125)

"On the Ganga Ghat." is a collection of stories, in which the readers find metaphysical ways of living. It is probably safe to say that you cannot begin to fathom the mystery of India without a visit to Varanasi. Raja Rao's profound mythic imagination is clearly depicted in all the stories.

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E-MC<sup>2</sup> : In relativity theory, it represents "Energy is equal to M-mass x c<sup>2</sup> - the squire of the speed of light.