

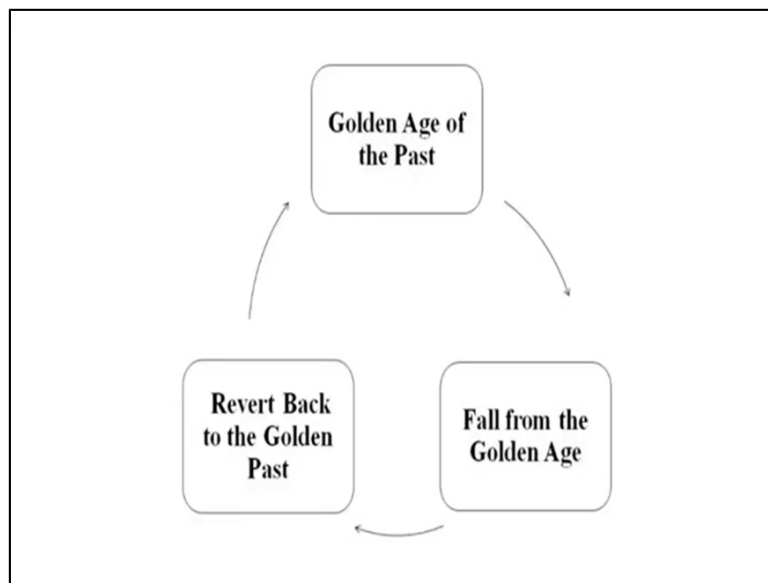
Postcolonial Literature
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture No. #11
Raja Rao's Kanthapura (I)

Welcome back, to this Lecture series on, Postcolonial Literature. As you know, we have been discussing, the rise of the middle class Nationalist Discourse in India, over the past few Lectures. And, as we have seen, this middle class Discourse of Nationalism, and of Decolonisation, was underpinned by certain particular patterns, thought patterns.

And, we have traced the development of these thought patterns, throughout the 19th century, starting from the works of Henry Vivian Derozio, to the works of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Now, in our previous Lecture, we have focused on two significant characteristics, of this discourse.

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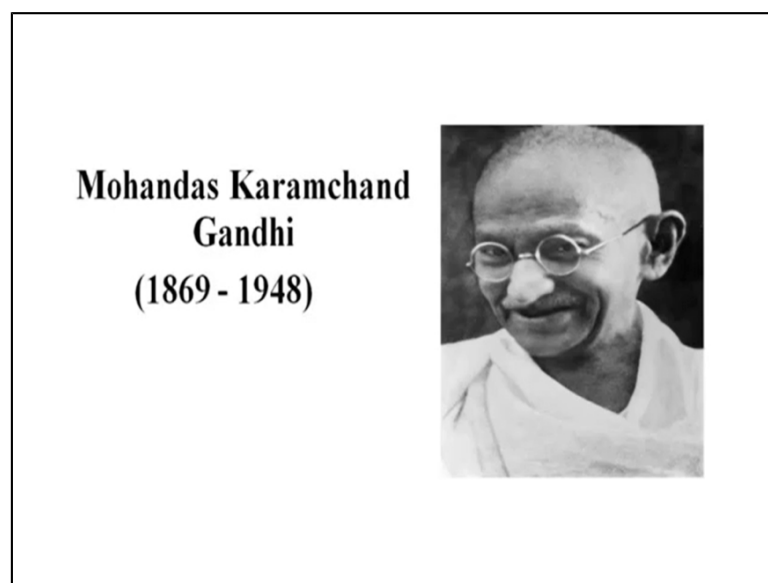


If you remember the first one, was the cyclical pattern of a golden past, degenerate present, and a promise of future recovery, a future reverting back, to that golden past. And, this cyclical pattern, was coupled with a second pattern, which was a deep regard for the knowledge, and cultural, and civilizational values of the coloniser, which were used in fact as a template, to script the path towards Decolonisation, and the recovery of the golden past.

And, this is of course familiar to you, from our previous discussion. In today's Lecture, we are going to see how, by the second decade of the 20th century, this Nationalist Discourse and its underlying patterns and assumptions, was starting to get transformed. And, the main figure behind this transformation, was of course, M K Gandhi. And, in this Lecture today, we will explore, Gandhi's impact on the underlying thought patterns of the middle class nationalist discourse.

And, after doing that, we will then move on, to Raja Rao's novel, Kanthapura, to see, how this discourse, as well as the charisma of Gandhi, as a middle class Anticolonial leader, was moulded in the form of fiction, by Raja Rao, in his novel Kanthapura, right. But, first, let us focus, on the figure of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who emerged as the supreme nationalist leader of India in the years, immediately following the first world war.

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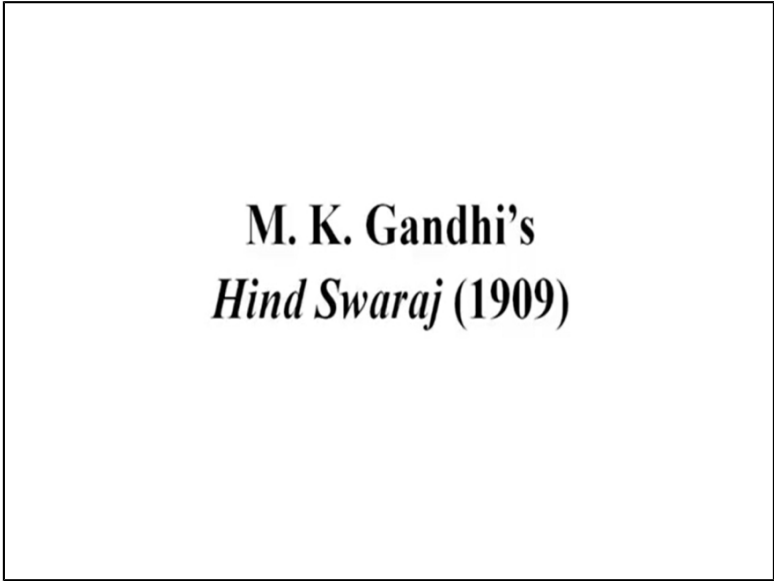
Now, Gandhi's dates, most of you will probably be familiar, are from 1869 to 1948. And again, if you study the career graph of Gandhi, we will come across a trajectory, that is typical of the Indian middle class, as I have defined it, after Sumit Sarkar, in one of my previous Lectures. Now, for instance, Gandhi too, received an English education. And indeed, like many of the middle class Nationalist Leaders, Gandhi went to England, to study law

Therefore, by profession, he was again, like many middle class leaders, a Barrister. And, his early career as a lawyer, was spent in South Africa. It was also in South Africa, that Gandhi emerged as an Anticolonial Political Leader. And, if you remember, during the first half of the

20th century, during the early 20th century, when Gandhi was in South Africa, both South Africa and India were British colonies.

So, Gandhi arrived in India, he return back to India, in 1915, to participate in the freedom struggle, at the behest of Gopal Krishna Gokhale. And, when he arrived in 1915, he was already an established political figure. Now, in fact, by the time he arrived, Gandhi had already published his seminal text, *Hind Swaraj*, which would significantly transform the nature of the middle class Nationalist Discourse.

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M. K. Gandhi's
Hind Swaraj (1909)

And, it is interesting to note that, *Hind Swaraj* was first published in 1909. And, Gandhi became the President of Indian National Congress, in the 1920's, when he truly became the leader of the middle class led Nationalist Movement. So, there is a gap of quite a few years, between the publication of *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, and his becoming the accepted supreme leader of the Nationalist Movement in India.

But, in spite of that gap, if we read *Hind Swaraj*, we can identify, almost all of the traces of Gandhian political ideology, that he was to bring to play, post the 1920's. And so, in that way, *Hind Swaraj* remained a very relevant text, throughout Gandhi's career. And, it is still relevant as a text, to understand the Gandhian political ideology, and Gandhi's intervention into the Nationalist Discourse.

Now, contrary to the version of the National Discourse, that we have traced, till the late 19th century writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the Gandhian discourse undermined the

earlier intertwining, of the respect towards the civilizational attainments of the western coloniser, and the desire to Decolonise India. And, it broke this intertwining, in two very significant ways. The first way, was through questioning the fact, that west represented a superior civilisation.

So, for instance, this is famous incident, where in which, Gandhi was apparently asked, what are your views on Western Civilisation. And, he said that, Western Civilisation would be a good idea. Which means that, according to Gandhi, Western Civilisation did not even exist, till the point, when he was speaking. So, the first major way, in which Gandhi disrupted, the earlier intertwining of a respect for the coloniser civilisation, and Indian nationalism, was by attacking, the very idea of Western Civilisation.

But, there was also a second way in which, he was critiquing the earlier Nationalist Discourse. And, that was by making nationalism, a more mass based thing. And, we will talk about these two points, separately, in today's Lecture. So, the late 19th century argument, that we have already discussed. There, in order to become a true Indian/Hindu, if you remember, when we have discussed Bankim, we have seen a problematic overlapping, between terms like Indian, Hindu, Bengali, etcetera.

So, according to this late 19th century argument, in order to become a true Indian/Hindu, it was imperative to learn from the European colonisers, and become more like them. And, this desire to fashion oneself, after the European coloniser was, I would say, rather ambiguously associated, with a desire to decolonise oneself. And, this ambiguity is best established, in the attitude towards the Colonial Authority, that people like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay showed.

Thus, for instance, in spite of Bankim being convinced, that anyone with a dark skin, did not stand a chance to receive fair treatment, in any employment, under the British Colonial Authority. Bankim was, as I have said earlier, equally convinced, that the rule of the British was essential, to teach the “Uncivilised and Uneducated people of present day India”. The present day people, who had fallen from that, glorious state of the past.

It was imperative for them to learn, from the Europeans, elements of civilisation, that they had once possessed, but they have now lost. So, we are already familiar with this pattern, that

the British, with their civilizational virtues, were actually seen as good teachers, who will teach the Indians, the very same civilizational values, which they had once possessed, during the golden age, but which they have now lost, and fall in into a state of degeneration.

Now, Gandhi in his turn, completely rejected this argument. Because, for him, the loss of Indian civilizational values, could be traced back, precisely to the European incursion, in Colonial India, and to the importation of “Western Civilisation” in the subcontinent, during the course of Colonialism. So, what unlike Bankim, say for instance, what Gandhi was arguing was that, Western Civilisation, rather than being a cure, was itself the problem.

Because, the fall of the Indian civilisation, according to Gandhi, can be traced back precisely, to the moment of European Colonial subjugation of India. So, it is important to note here however, that for Gandhi, not every European was tainted by the Western Civilisation, that he was speaking against. In fact, in his *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi specifies, that he derives a significant part of his critique of “Western Civilisation”.

From the works, of such westerners like, Tolstoy for instance, or Ruskin, Turow, and Emerson, these were all really, profoundly influential figures, as far as Gandhi was concerned. But, Gandhi’s text also makes it evident. Thus, that these intellectuals, represent a minority, that stands beyond the pale of the Western Civilisation, which Gandhi considered to be, really a Satanic Civilisation.

A Satanic Civilisation, which had otherwise, to quote Gandhi, taken such a hold on the people in Europe, that those who are in it, those who are in Europe, appear to be half mad. And, here it is interesting, if you compare this with, say Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Marlow’s perspective, Marlow seeing the Africans, from his boat, and considering them to be mad men. Here, in *Hind Swaraj*, we have Gandhi, comparing the entire European population, under the thrall of Western Civilisation, as half mad people.

Now, hence, whereas for Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, it was important to learn from the colonisers. For Gandhi, it was important for India to unlearn, what she has learned for the many years, that she had been colonised by the Europeans. According to Gandhi, Western Civilisation was essentially different, from Indian civilisation. And here, it is an important, a

very crucial point. For Bankim, it was possible to learn elements of the Indian civilisation, from the European colonisers.

Because, if you remember our discussion of Anandamath, Bankim is speaking about, how to revert back, how to recover the Sanatana Dharma, right, which is typically an Indian/Hindu thing. But, he is also saying, that in order to recover it, we should learn from the European colonisers. Which means, that there are certain elements of that Sanatana Dharma, which it is possible, to learn from the European colonisers.

What Gandhi is saying here is that, Western Civilisation and Indian civilisation are essentially in essence, two very different things. And therefore, it is wrong to assume, that you can learn one aspect, or more than one aspect of one civilisation, by following another civilisation, right. So, you cannot learn anything about Indian civilisation, by following Western Civilisation. Because, they were fundamentally, incompatible with each other. Thus, in his Hind Swaraj, Gandhi argues, and here again I quote, Gandhi's own words.

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“The tendency of Indian civilisation is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God.”

- *Hind Swaraj* (1909)

The tendency of Indian civilisation, is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western Civilisation is to propagate immorality. The latter, which means the Western Civilisation, is godless. The former, which means the Indian civilisation, is based on a belief in god. Gandhi further states that, the essence of this deeply moral and theistic Indian civilisation, had been perfected by the ancestors, of the modern day Indians.

And, as I said, found true on the unwell of experience. Therefore India, there was nothing to learn from anybody else. Thus, according to Gandhi, any attempt to emulate Western Civilisation was, for an Indian, tantamount to becoming detached, from his or her ancestral heritage, and deviating from his or her true identity, what Gandhi considered to be his or her true identity.

And, in here we arrive, therefore at a fundamental critique of the desire, to emulate the coloniser's civilisation, which we had detected in the Nationalist Discourse of the 19th century. For Gandhi, such an emulation is not a necessary step, towards recovering the lost glory of the past. In fact, on the contrary, it is regarded by him, as a deviation from this path, to recovery. Indeed, for Gandhi, attempting to imitate the westerners was equivalent to, and he uses this metaphor, quite often. It was equivalent to, contracting a disease.

And, he uses the disease metaphor, quite often in Hind Swaraj, for instance. Contracting a disease. What kind of disease. The disease of the Satanic Western Civilisation. Now, Gandhi however argues that, the spread of this disease of Western Civilisation, in the Indian subcontinent, was not complete. I mean, the disease had not been able to spread, everywhere. But rather, it was limited to a specific section, of the Indian society.

And, which was the section. According to Gandhi, this was the section of people, who had out of their own moral frailty, or own moral shortcoming, became enamoured with Western Civilisation, and who now sought to get rid of the English, so that they could rule over India, just like the English. In other words, they were to perpetuate the English rule, without the Englishman.

And, here again, this is really very interesting thing, that Gandhi does, in his Hind Swaraj. Where, he is saying, that people, who have been transformed to the Western Civilisation, Indians were been transformed to the Western Civilisations, how can you really distinguish them, from the English colonisers, who are oppressing you.

So, if the English educated Indian middle class, to which incidentally Gandhi himself belong, if those kind of people come to rule, if those kind of people, who were enamoured with Western Civilisation come to rule in India, even after throwing out the British, then it would not be very different. Because, they had already, these Indians had already transformed

themselves, through their engagement with the Western Civilisation into, well, Pseudo British, if you would like to call it that.

Now, the assertion near the end of Bankimchandra's Anandamath, about English rule being beneficial for India, is therefore turned on its head, by Gandhi. For him, a rule by the people, who transforms themselves into Englishmen, by acquiring their knowledge, was inevitably going to be as foreign, as the English rule. Hence, the process of regaining the golden past, and the true Indian identity of that past, did not involve, being under Colonial tutelage.

Rather, it involved moving away from the fear of influence of Western Civilisation, and moving away into the remote villages of the subcontinent, where the modern civilisation of the west, had not yet been able to penetrate. And, this is an important point, that Gandhi makes in Hind Swaraj. And therefore, I would like to quote that section. So, this is the voice of the editor.

If you read Hind Swaraj, you will see that, Hind Swaraj is basically a dialogue, between an editor of a journal, who represents the voice of Gandhi, and a questioning reader, who first comes to the editor, representing Gandhi, with a lot of scepticism. But then, is one over by, the logic of the editor, right. So, this is the editor, speaking.

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“And where this cursed modern civilization has not reached, India remains as it was before. The inhabitants of that part of India will very properly laugh at your new-fangled notions. The English do not rule over them, nor will you ever rule over them. Those in whose name we speak we do not know, nor do they know us. I would certainly advise you and those like you who love the motherland to go into the interior that has yet not been polluted by the railways, and to live there for six months.”

- Editor in *Hind Swaraj*

And, where this cursed modern civilisation, has not reached. By modern civilisation, Gandhi is referring to, what he considered to be the Satanic Western Civilisation. Where this cursed modern civilisation has not reached, India remains as it was before. The inhabitants of that

part of India, will very properly laugh at your new-fangled notions. The English, do not rule over them, nor will you, ever rule over them.

Now, you, is referred to the reader. But, it also refers to the section of people, who are according to Gandhi, who are enamoured with western values, and who have therefore tried turning themselves into Englishmen. So, Gandhi goes on to say that, those in whose name we speak. By we, he refers to the English educated middle class leadership. Those in whose name we speak, we do not know, nor do they know us.

I would certainly advise you, and those like you, who love the motherland, to go into the interior, that has yet not been polluted by the railways, and to live there for six months. This statement about not knowing those “in whose name, we speak”. And, the appeal to try and connect with them, leads to the second point, regarding how Gandhi complicated the Nationalist Discourse of the earlier period of the 19th century.

Indian middle class nationalism, as it developed during the 19th century, was in essence, largely Elitist. And, as noted earlier, for someone like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, for instance, becoming a true Hindu/Indian, and to regain the glory of the past, was to move away from the state of ignorance, in which, the ordinary Indian has fallen, at present. So, when I say Elitist, I mean, I do not want you to get me, wrong here.

19th century nationalist leaders, had a lot of concern for the masses. But, the reason for which I am saying that, there was an Elitist angle to this, was because, the very ideology was based on, trying to move up from the present state of degeneration, which Indian masses had apparently fallen into. And, this elevation, according to the 19th century nationalist, would be possible through, western style education, right.

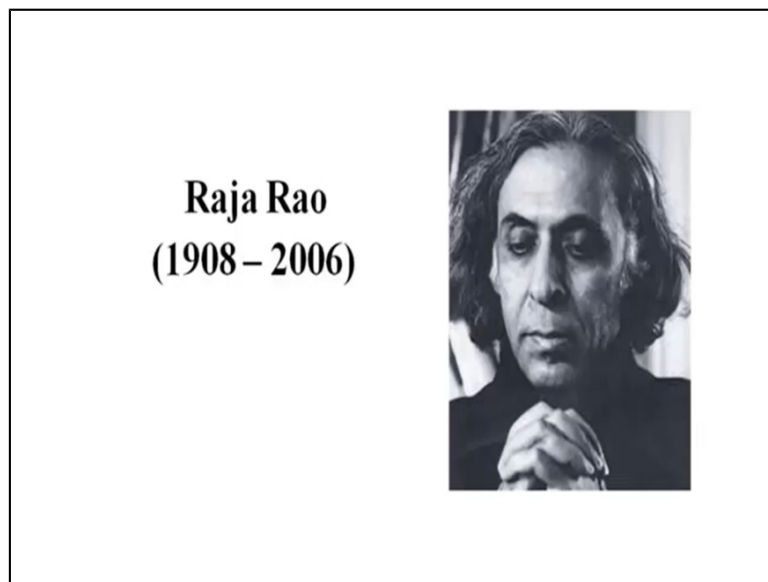
So, when I say Elitist, I refer to this trend of elevating yourself up, from the masses. Because, the mass is looked upon as, already degenerate, representing the degenerate state of present day India. Now, in contrast, as the Indian leader, who was most successful in channelizing mass protest against Colonialism, Gandhi repeatedly emphasised, the need to integrally connect with the masses, in whose name we speak.

Thus, rather than trying to elevate oneself from the masses, Gandhi's emphasis was unconsciously going down, to the level of the villages and the peasants, and becoming one with them. In Gandhi's own words, the so called upper classes, have to learn to live conscientiously, and religiously, and deliberately, the simple peasant life, knowing it to be a life giving, true happiness.

So, as you can see, for Gandhi, there is no notion of elevating oneself, through western education. Rather, it is all about a process of unlearning, the influence of the west, and going back to the state in which, most of India's village population, uncontaminated by the Western Civilisation, resides in.

So, now that we have summed up, the basic features of the Gandhian Nationalist Discourse, and how its thoughts about Decolonisation, differed from those present in the Nationalist Discourse, of the 19th century. Let us move on to the novel Kanthapura, and see how it makes use of this Gandhian discourse. Now, Kanthapura was published in 1938. And, was the first novel of the Indian Author, Raja Rao.

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Raja Rao's dates are 1908 to 2006. So, he led a marvellously long life. And, he was born, in the princely state of Mysore. And, spent his early life, in Hyderabad. But, later on, he moved to France, to pursue higher studies. And, it was here in France, that Rao wrote his English novel, Kanthapura. Now, this novel by Rao, can actually be considered as a belonging to that cluster of new Indian English fiction, that was coming up in the 1930's.

And, indeed Rao, was one of the three fiction writers, who completely change the course of Indian English novel, post 1930's. The other two writers, belonging to this group of three, are of course, Mulk Raj Anand, and R K Narayan. But, coming back to the novel *Kanthapura*, though it was written in France, it does not contain, any trace of Rao's life and experience, in that country.

And, in fact, Raja Rao was going to write about that, his experience in France extensively, later on in his novels like, *The Rope and The Serpent*, for instance, or *the Chess Master and His Moves*. But, in *Kanthapura*, we do not find anything like that. Rather here, we see Rao, engaged with the transformative effect, that Gandhi brought about in the social and political lives of Indians, during the 1920's and the 1930's.

Now, on the one hand, *Kanthapura* is an attempt to represent in fictional form, the Gandhian discourse of nationalism. Which, by the time, Rao was writing his novel, had gained a significant amount of traction in India. But, on the other hand, *Kanthapura* was also an attempt to trace the fault lines, that run through the Gandhian discourse. So, the novel is simultaneously a representation, and a critique, of the Gandhian discourse.

But, we will have to come back to this point of critique, in our next Lecture. In today's Lecture, let us see, why *Kanthapura*, is so widely recognised as a novel, about Gandhi and Gandhianism. Now, the main focus of this novel, is on a character called Moorthy, who journeys to the city, from his native village *Kanthapura*. That is also the name of the novel. And, he goes to the city, to gain western style university education, right.

So, here again, we see the career graph of a middle class emerging. But then, Moorthy comes back to the village. He comes back, without even completing his education. And, the novel is primarily, about this return. And, the Gandhian influence, that inspires Moorthy, to make this return.

Now, as we learn during the course of the novel, Moorthy while in the city, has a grand vision, in which he sees Gandhi, urging him to give up his foreign clothes, and his foreign university education, and go back, in the words of the novel, to the dumb millions of the villages. Now, this is of course, an exact echo of the sentiments of Gandhi, as expressed in *Hind Swaraj*. And remember, this is a text, published in 1938.

But, of course, the 1909 publication *Hind Swaraj*, is still evident, evidently relevant here. And, 1938 *Kanthapura*, is equalling, 1909 *Hind Swaraj*. And, in the way, *Kanthapura* equals *Hind Swaraj*, we can see, Gandhi's version of the cyclical pattern of the golden age fall, and return, that we have already traced, in Derozio and Bankim.

Now, in this Gandhian pattern, the golden age of civilisation, is not represented by a distant past. But rather, it is represented by the present generation of Indians, who have remained unaffected by the Western Civilisation. These are the people about whom, Gandhi talks in the quotation, that we have discussed earlier. These are the people of the villages, where railways have not yet reached, and have not yet connected them to the urban centres, where the disease of Western Civilisation is rampant.

Now, the fall in this Gandhian pattern, is thus a journey to the city, where one contracts the disease of the Satanic Civilisation of the west. And, as we see in the novel, when Moorthy has his vision of Gandhi, he is already in that diseased state, he is already in the city, where Western Civilisation or engagement with the Western Civilisation, is rampant.

The return to the golden age in the Gandhian discourse, is in turn, a spatial return to the village. And, an attempt to reconnect with the aspects of Indian civilisation, which had remained uncontaminated by western values. So, the vision of Gandhi, that Moorthy has, makes him give up his "Foreign Education". And, I use foreign within quotes. Because, whether to consider this, really foreign, can also be a matter of argument.

So, after having this vision of Gandhi, Moorthy gives up his foreign education, as well as his foreign clothes, that he had obtained in the city. And, he returns to his village, where he tries to fulfil Gandhi's socio-political agenda, by organising the people of *Kanthapura*, organising them. Not only them, in fact, but also the people of the nearby Coffee Estate, called the *Skeffington Coffee Estate*, to wage a non-violent war against the Colonial rule.

Now, this effort to organise the villages, is not merely political in its intent, but also has a social and cultural aspect to it. So Moorthy, while trying to organise the villagers, to fight Colonialism, also makes them fight caste segregation, as well as some of the segregations, that are imposed by patriarchy. Thus, in the novel, you will see Moorthy himself, getting

gradually transformed into a local Gandhi, who wages an incessant war, not only against Colonialism, but also against the social evils, which Gandhi considered pernicious to the Indian society.

In our next Lecture, we will see, how Raja Rao uses his character Moorthy, not only to fictionalise the real historical figure of Gandhi, but also to criticise Gandhian intervention, into the social, political, and cultural lives of Indians. Thank you.