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EXPLORING THE DEEPER DIMENSIONS OF INDIAN SPIRITUALITY IN RAJA RAO'S ON THE GANGA GHAT

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Abstract

Raja Rao is regarded as one of the trios (along with Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan) that laid the foundation of Indian writing in English. His role both as a creative writer and as an intellectual before and after the independence of India was a paradigm transition in the fictional technique and theme. After his return from France, he came into the company of Swami Atmanand, the great Vedantist philosopher and was profoundly influenced by his spiritual intuition. Later he acknowledged him as Guru. This was the other and very important trait of his personality that provided considerable spirit and substance for him for later fictional work. Such an impact changed his vision and he did not assume himself as a creative writer in the common sense of the term. For him, writing was not a mere mechanical, technical way of manifestation but penance and discretion, a kind of *sadhana* in the Indian sense. Philosophically and culturally Rao was honestly Indian and was a strong proponent of the Advaitic truth of "Shivoham, Shivoham". His third collection of short stories ***On the Ganga Ghat*** by Raja Rao offers a view into the simple lives of the unfortunate of the earth. The men and women of the book are not symbols of success or they would not have been in Benares at all, waiting for the end. There is anguish to each one, no longer painful. But the end is not far away and the end for which they wait is soothing. There is harmony, tranquility and silence of the soul as it goes to Kashi, the final goal of the journey on earth. Raja Rao has written these stories in a spiritual reverie, divinely experienced with the grace of Guru.

Keywords: Ganga, Benares, Human Life, Vedanta Philosophy, Spirituality

Raja Rao's third collection of short stories published in 1989 entitled 'On the Ganga Ghat' comprises eleven stories and they discover the play of human life. It looks like Raja Rao has written these stories in a spiritual reverie, divinely experienced with the grace of Guru.

He completed his higher education at the universities named Montellier and Sorbonne in France. During this stay, he understood that Western culture was completely steeped in the material world. This was the early sign of his future inclination to spirituality.

It is most likely that Raja Rao originated the idea of On the Ganga Ghat from the C.N.Sanjay Memorial lecture that he gave in Mysore in 1985. The stories On the Ganga Ghat are about the loss of loved ones, death and hardship in human life, self-denial, acceptance, wisdom, and revival of life and hope. These stories speak as much about the people and the way people have learnt to look at misfortunes in life as the writer's own attitude on the reasons for holding Ganga

In India, the river Ganga and the city of Varanasi are considered holy. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is not a person in India who has not heard of the river Ganga and the city of Benares. The two thousand five hundred ten kilometers long river, the foremost and the sacred of all the Indian rivers, rising at the foot of the Gangotri glacier and taking the name of Bhagirathi "... has held India's heart captive and drawn uncounted millions to her banks since the dawn of history. The Ganges is not just a river but a mother, a goddess, a tradition, a culture and much more.

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The city of Varanasi or Benares by which the river Ganga flows is particularly assumed sacred by the Hindus The rich and the poor, educated and the illiterate, unfortunate, unsuccessful and successful less reach this city with one ultimate wish in their hearts for termination of the cycle of life and death. Geography, history, myth and memory stand as proof of the importance of the river in India. Raja Rao's worship for the river and the city was spelled out in Serpent and the Rope. He writes: "Benares is eternal. There the dead neither die nor the living live. The dead come down to play on the banks of the Ganges, and the living who move about and even offer rice - balls to the manes, live in the illusion of a vast night and a bright city. "

One wonders whether on the Ganga Ghat is an anthology of short stories or a novel. The various chapters in the book tell the life stories of many people. The men and women seem to be disconnected at the surface level. Benares and Ganga however, happen to be the common factors in these different lives. Reading the book as a novel becomes possible contemplating the sorrow in human life as its theme and the river Ganga and the city of Benares which is at its heart, Raja Rao himself wishes the book to be read as a novel. Writing from Austin in Texas on October 12th, 1988, in his foreword to On Ganga Ghat he said: "These stories are so structured that the whole book should be read as a single novel. All persons and places are not true -but real .. . "(OGG, p.5)

The seemingly quizzical saying of Sri Atmananda Guru on the following page," Water Does Not Flow "(OGG p.7) comes before the first episode in the book. Each chapter in the book presents the life story of a person and is thus complete. The persons sketched here are simple folks whose lives are defined by sorrow. There is no plot as such to the story, yet the episodes depict deep -as- life pictures. Raja Rao does not try to unfold character or development of character; but only presents the spirit of a character's entire life, in humble acknowledgment of misfortune, grief and sorrow. The theme of the book is acquiescence to life. The belief and regard that these simple people have for gods and goddesses, animals and birds, give them their engaging quality. The stories of Bhim and Roopavathi, Madhoba, Muthradas of Vrindavan, the eccentric Bhedia, Shankar and Padma, Bholanath from the battlefield to Benares, Rani Rasomani, young boy Shivlal, *sadhu* and Nanna, Ranchodoss and Sudha lie at the heart of this book.

The first chapter is the story of Paul and the narrator Raja's visit to Benares; while the last chapter is the summing up.

Raja and his European friend Paul, two men, kind at heart, eager to subject themselves to the experience of Benares, alight at Mughalsarai station. The station is full of submissive coolies, old cars and poor, old hungry drivers anxious to get customers, busy vendors; and dirty dusty roads ... the list could be unending. Raja Rao writes: "The Mughalsarai coolies must be among the wisest men in the world. They see more humanity than at any other railway station on this globe. Five hundred million Hindus are their clients, and not just that: and man. "(OGG, p. 12) their forefather have come to this same Benares, life after life and thus have recognized a pilgrim connection between men. They carry all things - from baggage to ashes. They are born because of Mother Ganga. Mother Parvathi is the presiding goddess of the region where the Ganga flows. The Ganga melts all acts of man as silence dissolves all acts of speech. People saw only Ganga and its curve, not anything else. Benares has no night, the dead have no night. Virtue does not cultivate easily in Benares. What makes truth gives joy. Raja Rao writes that in Benares all is right; in Benares, one cannot live if one has no imagination. Thus begins the first of the stories - the most captivating, with a depiction of the big neem tree by the Dasaswamedha Ghat which houses many birds; parrots, sparrows, crows and vultures on its branches which coexist in an orderly fashion marking

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their territory and respecting a hierarchy. ode; *sadhus* live in its shade There is a story of suicide, rebirth, memory and also proof of divine grace of Rama and Sita embedded here. The Rajas of Vikrampur built a platform around the neem tree and gave the tree a golden pole and a flag with peacock insignia because once a princess of Vikrampur and her maid drowned themselves, thinking that "a Gange's death was better than a palace rot." (OGG, p. 21)

They are supposed to have taken birth as parrots - Bhim and Rupvati, who have a large litter and a good reputation because the little parrots of Bhim never steal, do not like cinema songs and learn the name of Ram . The Siddha protects the little ones from being stolen. Rupvati and Bhim adore each other. There is a nose-poking, quarreling, meddling, Bharadwaj – bird. The sparrow, the Madhu bird, Bhim the parrot and Krodha the vulture sit on the neem tree in uninterrupted tranquility. Bhim continues with his meditations. When the Swami tells Bhim about his end, Bhim fasts for two days and throws himself into the funeral procession pyre of the Swami.

Bhagirathi a sparrow recalls how Sita gave sparrows this "sign on our forehead", their iris from her honey-vermilion hue from the kumkum of her brow when they protected her from an ogre's sight. Rama, who was touched by this act, sparrows the boon that they would not be eaten by vultures or killed by the hawk. Then he also blessed Benares sparrows marking his thumb marks on their sides! Raja Rao writes about the two caste vultures of Benares - the high and the low; each does not eat with the other, they never invade the other's domains. The vultures of Benares are great obeyers of law. The vultures have some morals. They are fearless, proud and commonplace. But it is the tiny parrot population of Benares which meets anywhere, mates anywhere; yet they too obey some parrot laws. Thus in Benares, there is no caste but only virtue. In this story, Raja Rao has drawn attention not only to the birds that are essential indicators of the environmental balance so overlooked by the urban population but also to the affection of simple, common people towards these small creatures as cohabitants of mother earth.

Raja Rao has preferred to recount the story of the most ordinary of men like Madhobha - a good, playful, shrewd, grave, kind, young assistant of a firewood seller of Benares. He is a good wrestler who worships Hanuman on Saturdays. He loves wrestling and prefers it to life in the company of a human shrew. The lives of people like Madhobha are entwined with an honest business like selling firewood for the dead. Men plead for the driest wood even at a higher price. Raja Rao writes that the dogs of Benares can make out the "good - dead" from the "bad -dead". Madhobha dislikes and hates the death of the young. He is a strange man who sometimes weeps with the relatives of the dead. He weeps for a dead man. It means that the dead man was a good one. He feels a womanly occurrence which he names Mohini, whom he worships, loves and draws comfort from, on sad occasions. Mohini is neither a ghost nor a dancing girl but a beauty and a reality to him alone. She comes to collect his gifts and sings notes that he hears in sleep.

Madhobha dislikes being disturbed while he is speaking to Mohini. Madhobha loves Mohini, good people, wrestling and wearing silk shirts. His life's goal is to build a temple for Lord Shiva in his village.

Muthra Das belongs to the Kanakamal family in which there is a curse that they cannot have a son except by adoption. Muthra Das loves his wife Lakshmi. Married for fifty years they adopt a cousin's son who dies young. Lakshmi, hit by a bus, also dies. So Muthra Das comes with a cloth bundle and some cash from Vrindavan to Benares. He became a follower of Swami Sankarananda. He studies Vedanta, learns about sleep, wakeful state, dream state,

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and so on and he waits for death. This virtuous man -Muthra Das dies in Benares without ascertaining the resemblance between the dream state and the waking state. But there are many cycles to a person's life. Man goes where he has to go, but one day he will arrive at a place where there's no going or returning.

The next story is that of Bhedia who served as a Maharaja before the war. Today he is what people call him- insane. But he feels that he is a saint. He says: "The cucumber was bad so it became sad. The cucumber was bad so it became sad." (OGG, p.47)

Bhedia is a very moderate person. His mind is full of dreams, memory and fragments from legends. For him, the world is "imaginations". To live in one's imagination is to live in heaven truly. Bhedia's world is his heaven. Shalwar Khan, a Benares Street magician, is a friend of Bhedia. The snake in Shalwar Khan's wicker - basket fascinates Bhedia. Bhedia, the snake charmer Shalwar Khan, his son Putli, Putli's friend Mohone and Mohone's cow Jhaveri Bai breathe life into this tempting story of friendliness and mutual help at the lowest social level.

In the midst of myth, madness, misfortune, curse, renunciation, and at the heart of it all, lies the wonder of illusory life's continuity and happiness - the seed of new life so vital for its renewal. Of all the stories only this story, of Shankar and Padma, has some movement. There is a rich astrologer Shastri in Benares who tells a bundle of adorable lies. His son Shankar borrows money from his friend Madhobha the firewood seller with the promise that his Mohini can be materialized in the laboratory that he will set up at the university! His marriage to the Padma changes Shankar's life. The Padma has a humanizing effect on Shankar. She is loved by all, especially her mother-in-law. While Shankar calls himself "this barbarian Benares Brahmin 'or the 3Bs" (OGG, p.65) he considers his wife the Padma to be the "lotus born". Raja Rao's gentle touch of humor that lightens many a sad story sparkles here. He writes that Shankar felt like falling at Padma's feet in reaction to his dutiful wife's act of touching his feet; he wonders, 'how can virtue fall at the feet of vice? 'Her pregnancy catapults him into a mood of exaltation. Feeling like the richest man in Benares he borrows money from Madhoba once again to give his pregnant wife a ruby nose ring and plans to name his son his "$E = MC^2$"! (OGG, p.74)

Bholanath is another man who serves as a soldier in the armed forces. Reading out Tulasi Ramayana in army camps at night gives him a deep sense of peace. He also loves kirtans, songs of god. His wife Rati remains childless for a long. She neither grumbles nor utters a word in pain or contentment. Bholanath takes his wife, son Vishwanath and mother to Benares - all of whom he loses to death in the holy place. River Ganga became his father, mother and child since. He believes no home is a home that has no Ganga to flow by its side. Bholanath then begins to look after a *sadhu*. To him, home is that which has both a guru and a Ganga side by side. He tells the writer that his story has birth, marriage and death with God at its center.

Rani Rasomani's life is the moving account of a noble lady. She remembers that her husband Raja Pratapchandra Mazumdar was an outstanding and important Raja. But all internal life stops for her with the death of the Raja. She forgets even her name. She gives birth to a posthumous daughter named Himavathi. Raja Rao writes that her life seems to be made of a white sari, white hair and beads; it appears that she was born a widow. However, to Rani Rasomani nothing is real except Benares. She lives, loves not, hates not, and waits for death as a baby bird awaits its mother's beak.

To the philosopher and the writer who knows about humanity, there is no life that is mean or low. Shivalal, the young boy from Madhya Pradesh, orphaned by his father's death, and left

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poor by the family's greed and jealousy, follows a *sadhu* from Dholpur to Benares. He does many chores for the offensive *sadhu.* A woman of the devadasi community takes him home. Shivalal likes Nanna the woman and respects her. "After all, she was born a concubine and she performed what she was born to: her dharma, an ass's son is an ass; a buffalo's son is a he - buffalo. What was wrong about it anyway?" (OGG, p. 109)

She is like a big rock that is strong, firm and beautiful. Young Shivalal acts as a pimp. But he never touches a woman for "A woman is beauty," he said. "A woman is a creation. A woman is a sister. A woman is a mother. I worship all women." (OGG p.108) Nanna wishes to be initiated for which he goes back to beseech the *sadhu* for the mantra Nanna has asked. Nanna too gives up former life and becomes a disciple of the sadhu after fasting and prayers. On a Diwali night, the *sadhu* and Shivalal rejoice in the festival with great delight by tearing up and throwing all the currency notes in their possession into the Ganga.

The final story is one of the renunciation of a father following the example of his man-hating, marriage-hating daughter. Ranchodoss Sunderdoss is a jeweler and an honest man, gentle husband, affectionate father of two sons and a daughter Sudha, the most loved one of all. Sudha takes the name of Rama to fast, to pray and to be silent -a very strange thing for a young girl to do. One night she dreams that a *sadhu* would come looking for a pure soul. The *sadhu* comes into the house and falls to the feet of Sudha. She gets an unexpected vision of her past life. Sadhu Sunderanandji initiates her into *sannyasa* much to the displeasure of her mother. He also asks Sudha to read Vasishta Ramayan. Ranchodoss accepts his daughter's renunciation and later one day he too takes initiation into *sannyasa.*

The characters in this book are sketched against a backdrop of tradition, philosophy, trust in God and obedience to life. Fact, fancy, myth, legend and history breathe life into these lives. The stories are like a string of pearls pure, simple and rich in human feeling. These are not so many stories as they are sketches of life in its diverse shades. What they impress on the reader's mind is a feeling, a color, mostly gray. It is appropriate to speak about the Ganga Ghat in terms of colors and impressions which waft like white clouds in a gray sky. Though the one principal theme here is death and preoccupation with going through this life in humble submission, it is really a prayer for the cycle of life to stop on the banks of eternity. There can be no clear dividing line between life and death when all of it is an illusion eventually.

On the Ganga Ghat by Raja Rao offers a sight into the simple lives of the unfortunate of the earth. The men and women of the book are not symbols of success or they would not have been in Benares at all, waiting for the end. There is anguish to each one, no longer painful. But the end is not far away and the end for which they wait is soothing. There is peace, tranquility and silence of the soul as it goes to Kashi the final destination of the journey on earth.

The Ganga is not a river; it is a symbol of *jnana,* that knowledge that turns into wisdom that renews itself ever. Vedanta considers the world to be an illusion, whereas Brahman or the creative consciousness alone is real. The opening of the great cosmic vision is *jnana,* the end of the illusion of the reality of pain in human life. Ganga is Jnana Ganga, the stream of wisdom; she is the form of pure realization. Hindus desire to be in contact with Ganga in life as in death. People's devotion to Ganga and their submission to the spirit of Benares the place, appear to be the effect of a life that is annoyed with the humanity of time, brutality of fate, and smallness of human ability.

Raja Rao has adopted the simple narrative form, the episode, -in place of the *puranic itihasic* forms for his fiction- to catch the lives of the humblest of people from a mad man to a pimp,

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from a prostitute to a prosperous businessman, from a student to a housewife, from a firewood seller to parrots and sparrows.

All forms of life are holy. Human beings are important in evolution Equally important and sacred are the animals, cows, horses, pigs, dogs, vultures, crows, parrots, and sparrows ... If only humans could know what the so-called lesser creatures' memory carries, history may have to be rewritten again. Such is the Vedantic regard that Raja Rao presents here for all beings.

On the Ganga Ghat, thus is a peak and crystallization of Raja Rao's philosophical approach to life. Not only the intense humanity but the deep springs of Vedanta philosophy from which the writer draws are evident in this book. The society, the men and women here are very common folk but nevertheless, they are human and humane. On the Ganga Ghat is a mature work of Raja Rao which offers comfort and relief to souls who have suffered.

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