

Gandhian Philosophy and kinetics of Sattva Guna in ‘Waiting for the Mahatma’

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Abstract: R. K. Narayan expresses in his novels the Indian ethos. Though he writes in English language, he writes of India, Indian culture, Indian people, Indian family and Hindu Mythology. He talks of social, economic and religious life in India. Narayan's novels carry within them explicit and implicit moral values and lay great emphasis on the intrinsic good nature of human beings. In his writings, goodness ultimately triumphs over evil. Deep belief in an ethical and principled value system characterises his novels and their characters. His heroes portray an evolving consciousness, which may begin with a note of uncertainty, turmoil and loneliness, but ends up in certainty, peace and fullness. Combined with this, there is a deep belief in the positive features of the traditional Hindu faith in many of his novels. These attributes have been explored by many researchers, but have not been explicitly classified under the signifying Sattva Guna. This paper explores precisely the Sattva Guna in the main character of Narayan's novel 'Waiting for the Mahatma'.

The early pioneering works of Indian-Anglican fiction were social, historical, detective and romantic. Indo-Anglican fiction was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. The period during the Freedom struggle and after it has been the most fertile period.

Narayan's novels are mainly the novels of characters. His characterization may not be as great as that of Shakespeare or Charles Dickens, but it is only next to the great artists. His range of characters, like that of Jane Austen, is limited. He chooses his people from the middle class of South India. But they are drawn with a convincing psychological consistency. These characters are full of life and vitality. They are thoroughly human in their likes and dislikes, and are neither saints nor sinners, but beings as ordinary or extra-ordinary as we are. Narayan is able to draw complex characters too. Krishna, Ramani, Savitri, Sampath, Srinivas, Sriram, Raju, Rosie, Marco, Shanta Bai are some of his memorable creations. R.K. Narayan's view of social amalgamation is Indian and therefore his characters are involved in occupations primarily as school-teachers, poets, printers, householders, money-vendor or office-goers.

Narayan has written stories about people, their emotions and their relationships. He has portrayed the lives and feelings of students, teachers, parents, grandparents, journalists, artists, financiers, film-makers and movie stars. This makes his characters universal. Seeing the deep preponderance of spirituality, tradition, *dharma* and *karma* in Narayan's novels, it is fascinating to explore where, why and how modes of nature (Gunas) are reflected in his protagonists and characters.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna talks about the three *Gunas-Sattva* (goodness or purity), *Rajas* (passion), *Tamas* (darkness) which are present in all beings. The mode of goodness (*Sattva*) is characterised by purity, illumination, order, stability, permanence, happiness, spirituality, cleanliness and health. The knowledge that leads to prosperity and peace is in the mode of goodness and passion. This paper explores precisely the *SattvaGuna* in the main protagonist of 'Waiting for the Mahatma'.

SATTVA is purity. Sattva is light. Sattva is wisdom. Happiness and Sattva stay together. Harmony and Sattva breathe together. The senses in Sattva are surcharged with the light of knowledge. If one leaves the body when Sattva prevails, then to the pure abode of the sages he goes (Chapter 14: Bhagvad Gita). 1

Sattva mode denotes the influence of wisdom and knowledge in thoughts; words and actions, kindness, compassion and altruism are closely associated with wisdom. Without sympathy and compassion, rationality and reason fail to prevail. Thus the distinguishing features of SattvaGuna are intermingled. Narayan in his novel 'Waiting for Mahatma' shows qualities of altruism, empathy, wisdom, kindness, divinity and purity in the character of Sriram. He has sympathy towards others, shows rationality in his judgement and his actions strongly lean towards Gandhiji's doctrine of love and non-violence. He believes in doing his duty according to his faith in religion and spirituality. Thus he shows predominance of *sattvaGuna*.

'Waiting for the Mahatma' traces the metamorphosis of sriram from an immature, weak young man to a thinking individual. His journey in the novel seesaws between impatience and awareness. Sriram comes to understand issues like untouchability, hand spun khadi cloth, spirit of nationalism, truth, non-violence and love.

This protagonist, then, comes under the predominance of SattvaGuna. In shaping his character, Narayan has used values of kindness, patience and understanding of Gandhian values and doctrine of non-violence, highlighted alongside love for one's country. Though initially, the character of Sriram cannot be regarded as having predominantly the sattvaGuna becomes critical in the framing of his character.

The chief characteristic of a person under the influence of SattvaGuna is that he believes in purity of thoughts, words and actions. Md. Rizwan considers Narayan to be 'essentially moral in his attitude towards life....a man of moral conscience'.² Wisdom is one of the chief qualities of SattvaGuna. Wisdom is the ability to think and act, using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight. Wisdom has been regarded as one of the four cardinal virtues and as a virtue, it is a habit or disposition to perform the action with the highest degree of adequacy under any given circumstances.

Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness or understanding of someone or something, such as facts, information, descriptions, or skills, which is acquired through experience or education by perceiving, discovering or learning. It can refer to a theatrical or practical understanding of a subject. It can be implicit (as with practical skill or expertise) or explicit (as with the theatrical understanding of a subject); it can be informal or systematic. The philosopher Plato fabulously defined knowledge as 'justified true belief'. The God of intellect (wisdom) is Ganesha and the Goddess of knowledge is Saraswati.

It needs to be stated that truth is an integral part of wisdom and knowledge. The novel 'Waiting for the Mahatma' epitomises the sattvaGuna of wisdom and knowledge through the Gandhian way of life, reflected in the character of Sriram. He comes under the guidance and influence of Gandhi, who is very wise and knowledgeable. Sriram has shades of sattvaGuna in the beginning when he questions as to 'why anything should be concealed from anyone?'.³ he also wants to always like to know what he is doing. However, the values of truth, non-violence, respect for all castes and patriotism dawn on him only when he comes in contact with the Mahatma, who visits his town Malgudi. Digamber Singh Dewari states:

As Gandhian thought presents experimental truth, Narayan's fiction also presents imaginative truth. The imaginary town of Malgudi which presents a fictional background to Narayan's novels is rightly viewed by G. J. V. Prasad as "less a place and more a point of view". Though the topography of Malgudi also expands as narayan's career as a novelist matures, Narayan is less concerned in presenting literal truth.⁴

DhananjayTripathi, writing on Phenomenology and consciousness in R.K.Narayan's novels is of the view:

'Waiting for the Mahatma' is very significant because it helps to demolish the myth that Narayan escapes the social reality....(It) provides ample scope for phenomenological reading....(and) is a full scale portrayal of the author's consciousness of the Gandhian movement.⁵

Throughout the novel, Narayan makes Sriram hear the discourses of Gandhi and makes Sriram reflect on and internalise 'that there must be a great deal in what he says. We always think that we are superior people. How granny bullies that ragged scavenger who comes to our house every day to sweep our backyard!' (30-31). initially though Sriram joins Gandhi's movement for independence due to his attraction for Bharti, later he comes on his own and shows independent thinking, an ingredient linked closely to SattvaGuna. He says, "Even the British government could not make me do what I didn't want to" (198). In this journey of finding himself, he goes to the jail, is released in free India and finally witnesses the Mahatma's assassination. K. Chellapan states:

Narayan's characters are literary incarnations of the Gandhian ideal. They are people in quest of truth. They embody the greatest virtue of the Hindu way of life at the level of the man in the street; exactly where Gandhiji wanted them to be.⁶

Compassion and sympathy is another predominating quality of SattvaGuna. In this novel, Sriram, after coming in contact with Gandhi realises what it means to be compassionate towards others. The issue of untouchability is addressed by Narayan when the narrative states that Mahatma preferred staying in a hut 'belonging to the city sweepers who lived on the bank of the river...These men spent less than tenth of their income on food or clothing, always depending upon mendicancy in their off hours for survival.....Their possessions were few; if a cow or a calf died in the city they were called into carry off the carcass and then the colony at the river's edge brightened up for they held a feast on the flesh of the dead animal and made money out of the hide'(37). In Prakash M. Joshi's words:

Gandhiji is a character and not a symbol; Narayan points in 'Waiting for the Mahatma'. The novelist keeps within his artistic edge as a character and shows him not in terms of great political events rather to the ordinary event retaining his historical authenticity. Narayan shows him among the Harijans, villagers, children and the volunteers talking about day-to-day life. Mahatma Gandhi is invested with Narayan's characteristic quality: an amused and tolerant humour.⁷

Narayan highlights the Mahatma's concern for truth, his simplicity, his love for children and finally his sense of humour. His thought and philosophy find a suitable response in the millions of Indians through this novel. There is also an indication that a large section of Indian public did not understand Gandhism to a great

extent. Even Sriram, though he felt the magnetic pull of Gandhi, did not know or understand Gandhian philosophy properly (89). Sriram understands the SattvaGuna of selfless live towards the weak and the downtrodden, compassion and love for all, besides the value of truth and non-violence. This is made possible by Narayan by making Sriram come in close contact with Gandhi and Bharti, a true follower of Gandhi.

Since Gandhian way of Life is synonymous with the sattvaguna of truth and non-violence, the study of this particular characteristic adds a new dimension to this novel of Narayan. Gandhi practiced what he preached. He was disciplined in his food habits and meditation, practised non-violence in thought and action while fighting for India's independence, championed empathy for the poor and downtrodden, was in support of abolishing untouchability and advocated equality for women by promoting women's education. All these qualities show the presence of SattvaGuna. Since Sriram follows the teachings of Mahatma and tread the path shown by him, Gandhian way of life becomes synonymous with SattvaGuna.

Elements of Gandhi's philosophy are rooted in the Indian religions of Jainism and Buddhism. Both of these advocate ahimsa (non-violence), which is "absence of the desire to kill or harm" (Chapple:10).⁸ Ahimsa is a way of living and thinking which respects this deeply.

Karen Sihra, while studying the 'Philosophical Contributions of Gandhi's Ideas on Non-Violence' observes:

"Gandhi insists there are negative and positive elements of Ahimsa. While his definition includes both elements, the distinction is important. The negative elements are defined as merely non-injury or absence of physical violence. The positive elements embrace much more than this. In its positive form, Ahimsa means the largest love, the greatest charity. Ahimsa in its negative form involves only the individual. Love and charity are not extended when one refrains from injuring another, as love and charity are retained for the individual refraining from violence. Ahimsa in its purist and most positive form is a mental behaviour, a consciousness; therefore, the way one knows and carries out relationships is what is essentially important. In this form, ahimsa engages the other and extends oneself to the other. What results from this is peace with the other and a spiritual freedom for oneself".⁹

Gandhian values, thoughts and his doctrine of love and ahimsa bear heavily on Narayan and it comes across in his writings in all his novels. At an individual level one can say that practically all of Narayan's heroes go through an 'experiment with truth'. This experiment is what his novel are primarily concerned with. Gandhi wanted to revive the spirit of Vivekananda and Ramakrishna to lift India out of the religious superstitions it had fallen into. Narayan's heroes prove to be very Gandhian in spirit.

Digamber Singh Dewari who has analysed 'Gandhian Bearings on R.K.Narayan's novels', maintains that 'Gandhi was essentially a man with a great sense of humour. Humour was not an additional gift to Gandhi. It was in the very blood that flowed in his veins. His subtle humour made him survive many personal and political crises'.¹⁰ M Sudha concludes that the principles of Gandhi are very well exhibited in Narayan's novels. Gandhi not only struggled for India's freedom, but also advocated non-violence. His 'Satyagrah' was based on boundless love and compassion. He spoke of truth and did not like falsehood:

"For example, in the novel 'Waiting for the Mahatma', Gandhiji himself has participated as character. Bharti, an important personality in the novel serves as a disciple of Gandhiji.His novels serve as a panorama for the future generation, to know Gandhi as a whole."¹¹

In his novel 'Waiting for the Mahatma', Narayan brings out the Gandhian philosophy and portrays Gandhi not only as a political leader, but also as a social thinker. Love blossoms between Sriram and Bharti with Gandhi being the backbone of the story. While highlighting the 'middle-period novels of R.K.Narayan', John Thieme claims that Sriram alternates between feeling of 'romantic importance, thinking he is a character out of an epic whose actions will determine future history and nostalgic longing for the tranquillity of his former Kabir Street life'.¹² Slowly Sriram evolves as a human being because of the profound impact of Gandhian way of life to him. To Gandhi, truth is the eternal principle of life, the regulating force of the universe. It is synonymous to God and is the only path of discovery of self. Gandhian truth is explained by Bharti to Sriram:

"None except absolute truth-speakers are allowed to come into Mahatma's camp. People who come here must take an oath of absolute truth before going into Mahatma's presence (55).

Similarly, Gopad, a volunteer in Gandhi's camp, says, "Mahatma will not let me be violent even in thought" (76). Further, while speaking to Sriram, Mahatma says, "(B)efore you aspire to drive the British from this country, you must drive every vestige of violence from your system. Remember that this is not going to be a fight with sticks and knives or guns but only with love" (77). Gandhian philosophy of 'Simple living and high thinking' is highlighted yet again in Bharti's words when she asks Sriram to sleep on the floor 'because Mahatmaji says so' (74). Mahatma's doctrine of selfless love is portrayed in Sriram's words, "Bapuji forbade us to refer to anyone in terms of religion as Muslims, Hindu, or Sikhs, but just as human beings" (244). Bharti's statement that "His (Gandhi's) last fast has completely fatigued him. Sometimes he lay there without moving, unconscious," (249), unearth Mahatma's belief of Ahimsa and his strong will power. Thus, Narayan, the master

story teller that he is, brings out Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, love, truth, simple-living-high-thinking in this novel. By making Mahatma a character in his story, he talks about Gandhi's love and respect for women, respect for all religions and caste, disgust at the practice of untouchability. Though the novel ends on a sad note of Gandhi's death, yet Narayan through his superb craftsmanship leaves a message of hope. The reader is made to understand that Sriram and Bharti, after getting married, will work on his principles surely because their impending marriage has a seal of mahatma's blessings.

Finally, Religious Bent of Mind and Spirituality is a quality which can be researched under the SattvaGuna because the word religion is often used interchangeably with faith, belief system or set of duties. Spirituality is defined as a process of personal transformation in accordance with religious ideals and emphasises humanistic ideas on moral qualities such as love, compassion, tolerance, patience, forgiveness, contentment, responsibility, harmony and a concern for others. A religion is an organised collection of beliefs, cultural systems and world views that relate humanity to an order of existence. Many religions have narratives, symbols and sacred histories that are intended to explain the meaning of life and to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their beliefs about the cosmos and human nature, people derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. Many religions may have organised behaviours, clergy, a definition of what constitutes adherence or membership, holy places and scriptures. The practice of a religion may also include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration of a deity, gods or goddesses, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service or other aspects of human culture. Religion may also contain mythology.

The typical dictionary definition of religion refers to a 'belief in, or the worship of, a God or Gods or the 'service and worship of God or the supernatural'. However, writers and scholars have expanded upon the 'belief in God' definitions as insufficient to capture the diversity of religious thought and experience. Indian religions are sometimes classified as the 'dharmic religions', as they all feature dharma, the specific law of reality and duties expected according to the religion. Concepts most of them share in common include 'karma', caste, reincarnation, *mantras*, *yantras* and *darshana*. Hinduism is the most ancient of still-active religions, with origins perhaps as far back as prehistoric times. Hinduism is not a monolithic religion but a religious category containing dozens of separate philosophies amalgamated as 'Sanatana Dharma', which is the name with which Hinduism has been known throughout history of its followers. Traditionally, spirituality has been defined as a process of personal transformation in accordance with religious ideals. Since the nineteenth century spirituality is often separated from religion and has become more oriented on subjective experience and psychological growth. It may refer to almost any kind of meaningful activity of blissful experience, but without a single, widely agreed definition. Not all modern notions of spirituality embrace transcendental ideas.

P.S.Sundaram observes Narayaan's novels as 'religious fables'.¹³ 'Waiting for the Mahatma' bears significantly on Gandhian view of religion. In this novel, a huge gathering awaiting the arrival of the fictional Gandhi are engrossed in chanting 'RaghupatiRaghav Raja Ram, PathithaPavanSita Ram', the litany of the historical Gandhi. In his public address Gandhi calls upon the audience to chant 'Ram Dhun', do 'spinning on the chakra' and to follow 'the practice of absolute truth and non-violence'. Thereafter, he advises Sriram to spin, read the Bhagvad Gita and utter Ram Nam continuously. Later Gandhi conveys to Bharti through his letter how he wished that she could read TulsiDas' Ramayana without any assistance. He further adds: "wherever you may be with a copy of Ramayana and Gita and a spinning wheel, there you are rightly occupied" (51). Gandhi describes his faith in God:

"I am surer of His existence than of the fact that you and I sitting in the room. Then, I can also testify that I may live without air and water but cannot live without Him. You can pluck out my eyes but that cannot kill me. But blast my belief in God and I am dead". (61)

Dewari states: "Narayan's novels manifest this Gandhian faith in God through various ways-prayers, pilgrimages, religious discourses, references to scriptures and the characters figuring in them, preponderance of the temple of various deities, the scriptural echo in the naming of the major characters." ¹⁴

Hence, it can be said that Sriram, protagonist in 'Waiting for the Mahatma' embody various characteristics of SattvaGuna. He is epitome of positive values and virtues, which in many ways combined with Gandhian values and essence of Hinduism, give him a rare depth.

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