



Raja Rao

Brief Biography of Raja Rao

Raja Rao was born to a historically influential Brahmin family in the South Indian state of Mysore (now Karnataka), where Kanthapura is also set. Rao's father taught Kannada (the local language that the book's characters presumably speak) and his mother died when Rao was four years old. Rao was the only Hindu student at his Muslim public school before he went to study English at the University of Madras and graduated in 1929, the same year he originally finished writing Kanthapura. He soon moved to France, where he studied French history and literature, and spent the next thirty years living between there and India. During the 1940s, he was active in the Indian independence movement. Rao moved to the United States in 1966, where he taught philosophy at the University of Texas until his retirement in 1986. He married three times: to the French teacher Camille Mouly in 1931, to the American actress Katherine Jones in 1965, and to the American Susan Vaught in 1986. From the 1960s onward, he won a number of prominent literary prizes, including the Indian Padma Bhushan in 1969 and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1988.

Historical Context of Kanthapura

Kanthapura is set during the early days of the Indian independence movement that ultimately liberated the nation from British colonial rule in 1947. This movement arguably lasted for the entire duration of British colonialism in South Asia, but the campaign of organized nonviolent resistance headed by Mohandas Gandhi and his Indian National Congress began in the 1920s after a British general ordered his troops to shoot thousands of peaceful protestors in the northern city of Amritsar. After deciding that it would be immoral to cooperate with the British government, Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement in an attempt to achieve Swaraj (self-rule) for India by encouraging Indians to refuse foreign goods (especially British liquor and clothing), resign their posts in British schools and government jobs, and refuse to fight for the British in World War II. Gandhi famously served two years in prison, went on numerous hunger strikes (including one to demand nonviolence among his own supporters after a group of Gandhists burned down a police station), and protested a new British tax on salt by marching nearly 400 kilometers to the ocean and making his own salt. He also gave women a prominent role in the independence movement. Ultimately, although the British imprisoned more than 100,000 Indians on political grounds, Gandhi's explicit demands for independence in the 1940s (called the Quit India Movement) succeeded in 1947, although Gandhi opposed the ultimate decision to partition South Asia into Indian and Muslim states. He was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist shortly after India won independence, in 1948, and over two million people attended his funeral.

Key Facts about Kanthapura

Full Title: Kanthapura

When Written: 1929

Where Written: Chennai (Madras), India

When Published: 1938

Literary Period: Modern Indian Literature, Colonial Literature

Genre: Novel, Sthala-Purana (legendary history)

Setting: Kanthapura, a small village in Southwest India circa 1930

Climax: The townspeople burn Kanthapura to the ground and move to surrounding villages.

Antagonist: The British colonial government, as embodied by the policeman Badè Khan, the Sahib at the Skeffington Estate, locals who defend the colonial system, and the military and police forces that crush Kanthapura's rebellion

Point of View: First-person oral history told by Achakka.

Extra Credit for Kanthapura

Surname Traditionally, many South Indians do not use surnames; Raja Rao only adopted his in adulthood in order to get a passport.

Spirituality and the Absolute Like Kanthapura's protagonist Moorthy, Rao was deeply concerned with metaphysical questions, and his work became increasingly philosophical throughout his life. He considered writing and reading to be spiritual practices aimed at elevating consciousness, and during his acceptance speech for the Neustadt Prize in 1988, Rao explained that he considered himself "a man of silence" and the prize "not given to me, but to the That which is far beyond me, yet in me—because I alone know I am incapable of writing what people say I have written."