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# Space and Crowds in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

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English 491 (Senior Honors Seminar)  
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*Raja Rao's Kanthapura, set during the Gandhian resistance movement against British rule, focuses on the effects of colonialism and Gandhian ideology in a small rural Indian village. Narrated by elderly Brahmin woman Achakka, the story focuses on the actions of Gandhian man, Moorthy, and the effects of his actions on the villagers. Throughout the novel, Moorthy urges the villagers to join the Gandhian movement by engaging in protests (such as fighting against the toddy trees) and breaking away from the traditional caste-enforced system. His fellow villagers begin to embrace his ideologies and soon begin to join the movement, which leads to subsequent police interventions. This paper seeks to shed light on the link between the land and social behavior by focusing on the villagers' intimacy with the physical space around them and how characters—as well as ideological phenomena—manipulate this space to completely change the village's social structure. The paper introduces crowd psychology to take this socio-geographical notion a step further, showing that both traditional orthodoxy and Gandhism manipulate the villagers through the utilization of space and spatial imagery. The conclusion does away with the idea of space as a passive entity, asserting that within the village of Kanthapura, it is space itself that ultimately reflects the villagers' innermost desires and goals, making it a physical representation of the collective village mind.*

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## Introduction

Celebrated for its unique style of storytelling as well as its embedding of Indian myths and legends, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* has been looked at through various lenses, focusing on issues including the role of women, colonialism, and Gandhism. It has also, interestingly, been examined through the viewpoint of its geography: The physical layout of the village, or village

space, symbolizes certain influential political powers, such as British colonialism, the Hindu religion, and the newly introduced Gandhism. These powers exploit village space and in-grain themselves into the workings of Kanthapura. This idea, however, of connecting geography to influential powers can be expanded further to include the role of the villagers: As colonialism, religion, and Gandhism vie for geographical dominance, how does this affect village life? What are the social consequences of this spatial battle? The relationship between



I am a junior pursuing a bachelor's degree in English at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I hope to continue my studies and eventually earn my PhD. This particular piece sprung from my work in my ENG 491: Senior Honors Seminar class, which focused on various forms of resistance within narratives. The concept of space has always been of interest to me, and working on this essay has helped broaden both my knowledge and perspective on the subject. I wish to use what I have learned to further expand my work on space, hopefully bringing forth new ideas and viewpoints on the topic in the future.

space and crowds is a tightly coiled one; the way the villagers are organized plays a key role in how they will respond to these political powers around them. The geography of the village, therefore, does more than represent political influence; it also helps to shape it. As the leader of the village's Gandhian movement, Moorthy utilizes this notion of space and human behavior to further influence the crowd of *Kanthapura*.

### Space and Power

Before the rise of Gandhism within the village of *Kanthapura*, the relationship between its geography and the villagers is already well established. The novel's introduction serves the role of familiarizing readers with the layout of the village. Simultaneously, however, the introduction also geographically maps out the various powers that influence the lives of the villagers; descriptions of roadways and merchant carts as well as the mention of cardamom and coffee fields immediately establishes the presence of colonial capitalism within the society (Mondal 325). This space of capitalism surrounds the village on all sides. Merchant roadways flow in and out of *Kanthapura*, and the Skeffington Coffee Estate sits adjacent to the village. *Kanthapura* itself therefore sits within a "system of economic production" (Mondal 326). On the topic of colonial and post-colonial geographies in India, Satish Kumar writes that "space was construed largely in a socio-political context" (24). Thus the village, though small and remote, constantly experiences the capitalistic presence of British rule through the layout of the land around it; the space lying beyond the gates of the village mark the existence of the outside (and foreign) forces that impose themselves onto the villagers.

In a similar fashion, the village's local religion is also established based on its geographic presence, a power Anshuman Mondal labels in his essay as "orthodoxy" (326). The village worships the goddess *Kenamma*, who, as *Achakka*, narrator of the novel, describes, is the local goddess that watches over their fields and cares for them in troubled times. The goddess is geographically bound to *Kanthapura* and *Kanthapura* only; she notably does not help people outside of her village. *Achakka* recalls an incident regarding this notion, remarking that "she is the Goddess of *Kanthapura*, not of *Talassana*. They ought to have stayed in *Talassana* and gone to Goddess *Talassamma* to offer their prayers" (3). Hence, space plays a crucial role in the social identity of the villagers, promoting a sense of unity between them that is bound to the limits of their village gates. Interestingly, while religion may connect *Kanthapura*'s citizens, it is also the main factor in their segregation, striating the village into strictly ordered sections; the layout of the village is "rigid and static with a spatialization reflecting the hierarchical nature of the social order" (Mondal 326). Through this lens, the primary regulator of the village's segregation is the land itself, forcing the villagers to travel only through their given ap-

propriate roadways and never transgressing these boundaries. These geographic striations ultimately end up influencing the villager's mindsets. When describing her homeplace, *Achakka* comments: "our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Potters' quarter... How many huts we had there? I do not know... Of course you wouldn't expect me to go to the Pariah quarter" (5). The physical boundaries become almost second nature and embed themselves into the social workings of the village and how it functions.

With the powers of colonialism, capitalism and orthodoxy showing form within the space of the village, it is then no surprise that when Gandhism is introduced, it too takes the shape of geography, targeting and attacking the hierarchical space upon which *Kanthapura* is built. The most influential Gandhian value to take root among the characters is the idea of equality between the castes. Though this notion goes against what orthodoxy has maintained within the village, strangely, it is *through* a religious event that Gandhism is first introduced. The village's first contact with Gandhian values is through the tales of the *Harikatha*-man, who, in lieu of reciting the usual stories of Rama or Krishna, tells instead the birth of Gandhi. He announces to the villagers that they must "love all... Hindu, Mohammedan, Christian or Pariah, for all are equal before God" (12). This concept is amplified tenfold by the arrival of Moorthy, a student who has returned home from the city a Gandhian to convert his fellow villagers, which he does by the transgression of established spatial boundaries. Though a Brahmin by caste, Moorthy makes it a point to visit and befriend villagers of the lowest status, what others begin to label as "mixing with the Pariahs" (36). In addition to crossing these orthodox striations, he also breaks and changes them by "throwing open [a] temple to the Pariahs," thereby reconfiguring the layout of that space (26). These transgressions, though only physical, carry quite a severe social impact: The consequences of breaking the geographic rules is a complete ban from religion itself. *Bhatta*, a Brahmin leader in the village, remarks, "[T]he Swami says he will outcast every Brahmin who has touched a Pariah" (27). Hence the actions against orthodoxy take the form of transgressing space, and the consequences of doing so result in the banishment from that space itself. The battle between orthodoxy and Gandhism takes the form of the very land they rest upon, and whatever influence each power may hold relies directly on their control of that land. The fears and apprehensions of Gandhism therefore fabricate themselves as orthodoxy losing geographic control. When expressing his disdain about the "Pariah business," *Bhatta* laments that "Pariahs now come to the temple door and tomorrow they would like to be in the heart of it. They will one day put themselves in the place of the Brahmins and begin to teach the Vedas" (26). In his eyes, the way the lowest group will gain social power is not through education or riches, but through the overtaking of space, specifically the temple space, which could be seen to represent orthodoxy at its core.

### From Caste to Crowd: Distorting Spatial Boundaries

While the transgression of space combats orthodoxy in favor of Gandhism, it also has the effect of tearing down the social order of the village. As noted, the strict geographical layout of Kanthapura mirrors its hierarchical caste system. When the other villagers begin to physically “mix with the Pariahs,” they ultimately take power away from social order as well (37). The effect is the conglomeration of the various castes into a mass different from that of the segregated village, what could perhaps be labeled as a crowd. It is noted that “social movements often invoke crowd behavior,” which would allow for “a new order of life” once the movement has obtained its goals (MacGill Hughes vii-viii; Blumer 16). Since Gandhism is a social movement targeting the caste system, it is no surprise that the result is a crowd-like entity. This new crowd within the village of Kanthapura has different attributes than the individual villagers. Gustave Le Bon, in his book, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, remarks that oftentimes “the agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it” (13). Le Bon emphasizes that the new form must be viewed as a whole, offering the analogy of trying to describe objects by their “exact geometrical forms” (5). If the focus of an object rests too greatly on the minute shapes that create it, the overall form of the object is ignored. To truly understand that object, a bigger picture must be reflected upon. The same concept is applied to people. While Achakka, throughout her narrative, describes the crowd of Kanthapura by its individual components, such as the “Brahmins and Pariahs and Potters and Weavers” as well as by individual names like “Lakkamma and Madamma and Seethamma and Vedamma,” the overall form of Kanthapura is one entity, which would explain why, as they gathered in preparation of the toddy protest, she remarked that “men, women, children—and the Pariahs and the Weavers and the Potters all seemed to feel they were of one caste, one breath” (85, 125, 165). In addition to a crowd having attributes differing from that of the people amassing it, it also experiences emotions as one entity. It has been noted that “in a crowd, people give way more easily to emotions... they share the mood of the movement. They may weep, scream, or laugh wildly—all because everybody else seems to be doing so” (Hughes 3). Sentiments tend to spread within a crowd rapidly and effectively, further condensing individuals as well as amplifying the effects and goals of the gathering. While gathering to protest the toddy trees, Achakka remarks, “an uncontrollable emotion takes hold of us all... we clap our hands and sing and our eyes are filled with tears” (126). This not only unifies the once-segregated caste members, but also reaffirms their movement’s goal and actions.

The toddy tree protests are the product of Gandhian values, crowds and land, with all three coming together in the

struggle for power. Once again, the importance of geographic boundaries plays a role in how the villagers perceive the powers around them. After gathering the villagers into a crowd, Moorthy, who is now the village’s appointed Gandhian leader, announces that the “toddy trees are Government trees, and toddy booths are there to exploit the poor and unhappy” (125). It is important to note here another attribute of crowds, which is that they think in the simplest of terms, that is, in images (Le Bon 42). Thus by assigning the toddy trees as government trees, Moorthy is able to form an image of the government that is both reachable to the crowd as well as tangible; the trees are actual items that the crowd can climb and destroy, hence as they attack the trees, they are symbolically tearing down the government as well. This claim also lays down new physical boundaries for the crowd to transgress: Toddy trees are government trees, and therefore the land on which they grow can be seen as government land. By merely crossing those boundaries and placing themselves in that space, the crowd is symbolically distorting the government’s power, just as it had done with orthodoxy when allowing the traditionally outcast group to enter the temples. This reasoning explains why, during the protests, there is less importance on destroying the trees, but rather an emphasis on merely making headway into the toddy groves. Achakka describes the crowd in the heat of the moment, shouting that they “shall enter the toddy grove and tear out at least a toddy branch and break at least a toddy pot,” showing that while perhaps the crowd’s goal is to tear down the toddy trees, symbolically, it is enough to just invade the government’s boundaries for the villagers to feel that they had accomplished their mission (129). Additionally, the toddy trees also simultaneously serve to represent a Gandhian sin. Commercially, toddy trees are used to make alcohol, a product looked down upon in the Gandhian movement. During the protests, Moorthy shouts, “the Mahatma is a man of God; in his name do not drink and bring sin upon yourself and upon your community!” (141). The trees have another image prescribed to them; not only are they representing the government which oppresses the villagers institutionally, but they are also a Gandhian evil that pollutes them spiritually. These two images are compressed together as the villagers sing: “the toddy tree is a crooked tree/And the toddy milk a scorpion milk,” reaffirming their intentions and beliefs against the trees (141). The dual symbolism of the trees further solidifies their presence within the crowd’s mind: Suddenly, the trees harbor both the sin of the government as well as an enemy of Gandhian morals, making the crowd’s headway into the toddy fields doubly effective.

While Gandhism has entered the village and has begun to dissipate social and physical structures, that does not necessarily mean that the other powers have completely disappeared. The tension between orthodoxy and Gandhism is once again shown through the villagers’ choice of where they place themselves within the village. After learning of Moorthy’s upcoming return from jail, Waterfall Venkamma, in protest of Moorthy

and his Gandhian efforts, decides to hold her nuptial ceremony on the exact date and time of his arrival, forcing the villagers to choose which activity to attend. As a Brahmin, she holds the greatest power in the caste system and represents orthodoxy itself. Her feast holds a certain power; members of the lower castes cannot skip out on a Brahminic feast. Additionally, Moorthy has been excommunicated, and his status is nonexistent within the orthodox world, making his event—in the orthodox sense—void. She remarks snidely to her fellow villagers that they must “choose between a Brahminic feast and a feast for a polluted pig” (114). This demand forces the villagers to choose between Moorthy and Gandhism and Venkamma and orthodoxy. Unsurprisingly, this choice comes in a geographic form: Either the villagers follow the orthodox rules and attend Venkamma's dinner, or they break those rules and wait for Moorthy on the side of the road. They eventually choose to split themselves between the two events, signifying that although Gandhism has gained a considerable amount of power, the roots of orthodoxy still grasp onto the village.

### Moorthy as a Leader

Although the forms of Gandhian protest and of resistance portray themselves through the land, it is Moorthy who truly harnesses both powers to gather the villagers. Throughout the novel, his actions, speeches and tactics are aimed at the linkage between the villagers and space, which enhances his status as a leader. For a crowd to function, it oftentimes needs a source to look up to and depend upon. Social movements are no different. It has been remarked that “as a social movement develops, it comes to resemble a society” (Blumer 16). As the epicenter of this newly formed society, the leader is crucial to the formation and activation of goals, “the nucleus around which the opinions of the crowd are grouped and attain to identity” (Le Bon 68). As the first Gandhi man within the village and the catalyst that truly establishes Gandhism in *Kanthapura*, Moorthy serves as this center around which the villagers slowly gather. He also represents—on a local scale—the Mahatma himself. Leaders of crowds, however, must do more than merely introduce an idea for them to rise to power. To serve as the nucleus of a crowd, Le Bon notes that leaders “are more frequently men of action than thinkers” and that “they sacrifice their personal interest, their family—everything” for their cause (68). The latter would not only reaffirm their intentions to their followers, but also separate whatever ties they have that might potentially interfere with their work. As a Brahmin, Moorthy loses a great deal of social advantage when the Swami excommunicates him for his work. He also, in the process, loses his mother when she succumbs to grief of his banishment. This, however, does not stop him in his endeavors, and if anything fortifies his intentions. Upon hearing of his excommunication, he tells his followers, “let the Swami do

what he likes. I will go and do more and more Pariah work. I will go and eat with them if necessary” (41). His resoluteness amplifies his cause; the villagers now know that his goals are worth more than the title of a Brahmin. As a former Brahmin, however, Moorthy already possesses a great deal more authority than his other caste counterparts. While he may be fighting for caste equality and therefore would perhaps reject the idea that his social position plays a part in his leadership, it does not erase the fact that Brahmins have access to more social power than the other members of society. Similarly, Moorthy holds the advantage of having a reputation of goodness and wisdom. Achakka remarks: “[W]e know Moorthy had been to the city and he knew of things we did not know” (9). Hence, even before he begins advocating Gandhism in the village, he already has an established ethos that people admire. These attributes grant him a distinct advantage as a leading power within the village's movement.

While Moorthy may fit all the categories of a leader of a crowd, it is his tactics *after* reaching this position that truly fortify his power in the village. Once a crowd is formed and utilized for a purpose, the leader must be able to perpetuate this momentum; it must be sustained by constant reinforcement, and the best way to showcase these ideas is through example (Le Bon 72). As the leader of a Gandhian crowd, Moorthy perpetuates Gandhian values via example, which he once again does through the transgression of space. Throughout the narrative, Moorthy often travels from quarter to quarter, with Achakka commenting that “he even goes to the Potters' quarter and the Weavers' quarter and the Sudra quarter, and I closed my ears when I heard he went to the Pariah quarter” (9). Just as allowing a group formally banned to enter the temples helps to distort the power of orthodoxy, Moorthy continually crossing these physical boundaries helps strengthen his own power as a Gandhi man. The regularity of these crossings also serves the purpose of normalizing them, which simultaneously also normalizes the Gandhian values for which he stands.

Moorthy's actions help embed his ideas into the crowd; his words do the same. Interestingly, they too relate to the land. As stated before, crowds tend to think in images, which Moorthy is keenly aware of as he gives his speech after returning from prison:

We'll build a thousand-pillared temple, a temple more firm than any hath yet been builded, and each one of you be ye pillars in it... You know, brothers and sisters, we are here in a temple, and the temple is the temple of the One... and this too ye shall remember, whether Brahmin or bangle-seller, Pariah or priest, we are all one. (118)

By inscribing their actions into imagery of a temple, he is able to carve out a symbolic area representing the Gandhian values, which grounds the movement; now, instead of merely attack-

ing and taking over other spaces, the Gandhian movement has a space of its own.

### Nullifying Boundaries: Starting Anew

Unsurprisingly, the sudden arrest and consequent absence of Moorthy leaves the villagers in total disorder. It is important to note that when Achakka describes this confusion, she describes it in a physical form: running through the village in a state of panic. She recounts, “[W]e rush toward the temple, and shrieks come from the Brahmin street and the Weavers’ street...we rushed from backyard to backyard...Which way shall we go which way?” (149-150). The crossing of space here is different from the goal-oriented efforts when led by Moorthy; instead, it is as if the villagers’ confusion and fear have projected themselves onto the space of the village, with the geography mimicking the state of the crowd. Achakka describes her surroundings as “the whole world seems a jungle in battle,” giving the confusion a tangible form (150). The fire at Bhatta’s house serves as a further—and this time violent—breakdown of orthodox values as well as capitalistic values. As a Brahmin as well as a moneylender, Bhatta can be seen to represent these two forces; his house catching on fire and collapsing in the confusion serves to symbolize the final degeneration of the village’s hierarchical social and monetary structure. At this stage, the villagers have passed the point of no return.

The burning of the village at the end of the novel signifies not only the total degeneration of all powers within Kanthapura, but it also signifies the dissolution of the crowd. Orthodoxy may have kept Kanthapura segregated and the social hierarchy enforced, but it also served to keep the villagers together within the borders of the village. With the village gone, there is nothing physically binding the villagers together anymore, and they go their separate ways. Interestingly, it is Rachi, a widow of the lowest caste, who first begins to set the village on fire. Reflecting what has been said about the Gandhian movement, Pariahs, and the transgression of space, Rachi’s act takes all three elements and combines them to the extreme. Instead of distorting the boundaries of the village, she instead destroys them. The act can be seen as purifying; she has, knowingly or not, wiped clean all traces of power and social order in Kanthapura, presenting a clean slate on which new boundaries can be laid, which, as Rangè Gowda states, does indeed happen, telling Achakka that “men from Bombay have built houses on

the Bebbur mound, houses like the city” (182). In time, these boundaries may change too, and the different powers with it, showing that while land and social order may not at first seem connected, they are in fact deeply and intimately intertwined.

In Raja Rao’s novel, space is power. Whoever controls it controls those who inhabit it; breaking a geographical layout prompts a subsequent dissolution in social order, but why is that? Space is assigned certain power-influenced labels that maintain or destroy order, but so what? Perhaps this notion of space as power or power as space harbors a deeper significance; in this case, it would be very wrong to see space as a passive and inanimate backdrop on which Achakka’s story unfolds. Perhaps one reason why the manipulation of space is so impactful to the villagers is because space *itself* is a fluctuating entity that mimics the core identities of the villagers. Within the narrative, land and social order are deeply intertwined because they are one and the same. Kanthapura is surrounded by British-induced colonial capitalism, so too are the villagers; the village is segregated by religion-based regulations, so too are the social relations of its citizens. Indeed, space helps shape the power occupying the village because it is a physical representation of the collective village mindset, an active participant in the novel representing the villagers’ collective desires, fears, and goals.

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