



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.j.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

A Study of Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov* in the Light of Vedant Philosophy

Ashok A. Khuman

PhD Scholar

Saurashtra University, Rajkot



Abstract

Raja Rao is one of the founding figures in Indian English Literature along with R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. He is one who has interpreted the reality surrounding him and the world he was living in through his Vedantic lenses. The present paper examines Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov* in the light of Vedant Philosophy. The term "Vedant" is derived from Sanskrit. It means "Upanishads or end of the veda". Vedant is the one of the six Indian traditional philosophies which is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds. In fact, *Comrade Kirillov* presents a stage of development of the novelist. The novel discloses the essence of Vedanta Philosophy.

Key Words

Sadhna, Vedant, Spirituality, Indian Philosophy, Absolute, Truth

Research Article

The term "Vedant" is derived from Sanskrit. It means "Upanishads or end of the veda". Vedant is the one of the six Indian traditional philosophies which is universal in its application and is equally relevant to all countries, all cultures, and all religious backgrounds. Vedanta is a combination of two words: "Veda" which means "knowledge" and "anta" which means "the end of" or "the goal of." Here, Knowledge does not refer to the limited knowledge we acquire by reading books. "Knowledge" here means the knowledge of God as well as the knowledge of our own divine nature. Thus, Vedanta is the search for Self-knowledge as well as the search for Supreme Truth. The present paper examines Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov* in the light of Vedant Philosophy.

Raja Rao is one of the founding figures in Indian English Literature along with R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand. He is regarded by many critics as a philosopher novelist. He has made an endeavor not only to translate Indian sensibilities into English but also tried to incorporate Indian metaphysics and philosophy into his fictional work. His novels are deeply rooted in Indian philosophy and metaphysics. Raja Rao is one who has interpreted the reality surrounding him and the world he was living in through his Vedantic lenses.

Comrade Kirillov is a sketch of a South Indian man, Padmanabha Iyer. The novel explores the



dichotomy of the hero. An Indian who ventured abroad when still young, Kirillov came to England in 1928 and settled there. He is a seeker after truth. In fact, Kirillov, alias Padmanabhan Iyer is an Indian by birth. He chooses western path that of Communism for he thinks Communism is the right path through which he can attain his spiritual goal. He becomes a Marxist after experiencing and living under the impact of various philosophical ideas and schools. He is a realist philosopher whose journey is outward. He starts as a seeker of Truth, but after becoming a communist, he is “increasingly revealed by the narrator to be caught in a system which curtails his access to Truth.” (Paranjape xiv) Thus, Kirillov continuously rationalizes the major events in the world to suit his perspective. Nevertheless, following a visit to India several years after he has left, he realizes that his communism is only a thin upper layer in an essentially Indian psyche. Iren, his wife, also recognizes in her diary that he is almost biologically as Indian Brahmin and only intellectually a Marxist. As Pandey observes,

Kirillov holds that communism has metaphysics; a powerful logic and humanism. Communism is superior to Democracy because the latter does not have logic...Under the complete sway of communism, Kirillov had ones proclaimed that he was nothing but a communist, having no other identity. (38-39)

In fact, the narrator R. in *Comrade Kirillov* is Kirillov’s intellectual opposite, an adherent of *Advaita Vedant*. Despite being obsessed in Hindu traditional philosophy, he was fascinated by Kirillov. In fact, Raja Rao exposes the hypocrisy of Indian communists through the narrator’s attacks on Kirillov, and this seems to be novelist’s motive behind writing this novel. In this novel, Raja Rao attempts to establish the superiority of *Advaita Vedanta* over Marxism and Materialism. The novelist was inspired from Dostoevsky to write *Comrade Kirillov*. As Paranjape remarks “Apart from its sources, the other important thing about this neglected novel is its prophetic quality in that it predicts the downfall of Communism.” (xv) Thus, the novels offers a dichotomy between Indian and western approach of attaining liberation. As it is noted by Krishna Nandan Singh,

For quite some time, Comrade Kirillov is the champion of communism with powerful logic and humanism. The communistic truth is presented as something purifying and beneficial to mankind. Raja Rao feels that Marxism is concerned with the changing reality, it cannot emulate Vedantism which is the highest form of philosophical system. (7)

Kirillov chooses to help the humanity by undergoing activities as to advocate for the equality in



society. But, the journey undertaken by Kirillov ends in failure. As Alterno observes, “From an ideological standpoints then, Kirillov can be said to have moved from Moorthy’s Gandhism in Kanthapura gradually to Besant’s theosophy, to finally embrace an unconvinced Marxism which will bring him to despair.” (137) On the other hand, the narrator R. is convinced that man can succeed only if he takes inward journey and start examining the self and not the world. As J. P. Tripathi notes, “Although the life-spirit of Kirillov is Communism and in all his dreams of a golden picture of India Communism has an important place, it is clear from the novel that Communism is not panacea of world maladies.” (246) Thus, communism is an inadequate approach in terms of eradicating the human suffering. As Pandey observes,

The novelist demonstrates that since Marxism is related to the ephemeral and the changing reality, it cannot emulate Vedantism which is the highest type of philosophical system in as much as it must satisfactory delineates the fundamental reality about the universe. The following remarks of the narrator R. about Vedanta and Comrade Kirillov’s communism amply illustrate it;...He was wonderful-Kirillov was- but his logic and mine belonged to different dimensions. Vedant alone has the limits to your ignorant authority and asks for more inquiry into your biological, psychological and psychic self, delimiting you bit by bit into acute dissolution, when, intensified in your desperate anonymity. You surrender yourself to that which is ever “I”. And in that is-ness there is none that you are brother to. Love has no brother, only lovingness has. (40)

Thus, the materialistic Marxist approach offers no solution to the agony and anguish of an Indian like Kirillov. Only spiritual enrichment can make a man happy. Arjuna succeeded because he followed the path that was proper which taught him true duty of man. Being an Indian Brahmin, Kirillov has forgotten his spiritual legacy. As Paranjape observes,

It is interesting to note that *Comrade Kirillov*, first published in a French translation in 1965, was written earlier. Thematically, it represents that stage of negation before the spiritual fulfillment of *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Kirillov, as a Communist and atheist, has negated the Karma Yoga of *Kanthapura* and Janan Yoga of *The Serpent and the Rope* by denying the existence of the Absolute; thus, his quest results in failure.

On one hand, there is a deep impact of Marxism and on the other he can’t escape from his roots as an Indian. He loves his motherland. As it is noted in the novel “To hear him recite Sanscrit verse was like



listening to a Pandit from Tanjore. His sincerity, his enthusiasm, his learning, were all alike - of one sovereign made.” (9-10) His fascination toward Marxism and his love for the Veda and Indian philosophy has split his personality. Thus, Kirillov is very confused between two different ways of life. The narrator R. tries to remove the veil of ignorance in the Kirillov’s mind. The narrator R. explains to Kirillov the essence of Vedanta. As the narrator R. muses,

Vedanta alone has the courage of the ultimate, it lovingly uncovers the limits to your own ignorant authority and asks for more into your biological, physiological and psychic self, delimiting you bit by bit into acute dissolution when intensified in your desperate anonymity, you surrender yourself to that which is ever your “I”. And is that is less there is more you are brother to. Lone has no brother, only lovingness has. (73)

In fact, the novel exposes the hypocrisy of Kirillov. His confusion is the novelist’s own dilemma whether to affirm communism or to stick the traditional philosophy. This dilemma resides in the mind of the novelist until he meets his Guru. It is then that he realizes that he should begin his spiritual journey from the self. Therefore, the efforts made by Kirillov ends in spiritual dissatisfaction because he encounters the problem of identity. Thus, the problem of identity becomes a major crisis. As Esha Dey observes,

The problem identity for a Hindu magnifies itself for another inexplicable mystery, the intimate relation between the Indian soil and the Hindu roots which stubbornly refuse transplantation anywhere else in the world. Indeed “Hindu” leads to be a geographical concept which seeks to disregard time. So the Mahabharata points out, that a happy hindu is one who is never on exile. (231)

As a matter of fact, the core of Kirillov’s character, as well as the novel’s theme, lies in the perilous situation of an Indian communist, who, after all, remains a mere convert to an alien doctrine while maintaining deep entrenched cultural ties in his subconscious. As a result, rather than being a twice-born leftist like many others of his like, he became a thrice-born leftist who despised the status quo. As Kirillov muses “I know only one God, and that is the common man. I know only one worship and that is the Party meeting. I know only one morality and that is a classless society”. (119)

It is evident that Kirillov’s mental dichotomy stems directly from the incompatible incapacity to merge his political beliefs and spiritual preferences. The violent combination of disparate concepts, everyday and spiritual, conveys a continuous air of skepticism. Communists negate God, on the other hand,



for the Hindu it means total destruction. As Medha Sachdev points out, “It finally establishes the superiority of ‘Advaitavada’ over all other schools of thought. The shifting belief, the state of doubt, delusion and uncertainty are made evident in the novel as the hero does not adhere to any single philosophy.” (74) Kirillov’s character reveals the failure in the process of attaining the ultimate truth. Like Moorthy, Kirillov attracted towards Marxism as a trendy thing to pursue. But his fascination towards western approach has brought no concrete result. Kirillov is lacking the true knowledge behind what he is doing. As it is noted in the novel,

Unlike Europe, it is not sincerity that goes a-begging in India - we are not yet that corrupt. But we shall soon reach the requisite standards. We are human like all. But one thing I felt sorry for when I was in India - the neglect of our classics. I forgot my politics for a time and jumped into the classics. It was such a joy to go back to *Uttarama Charita* and to Kalidasa. (75)

In fact, Kirillov’s confusion is equal to that of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. Like Arjuna, Kirillov too begins with confusion and end with realization. At the end of the novel Kirillov realizes the essence of Vedanta. He affirms that Indian philosophy can uplift the whole world. The three paths i.e. Jnana, Karma and Bhakti as enunciated in the *Bhagavad Gita* are the appropriate for anyone. The follower of these paths realizes the Supreme Truth. Kirillov’s negation of these paths is the cause of his failure. As Niranjana observes,

Kirillov knows that the greatest virtue on earth is Truth and Truth is the only substance that India can offer to the materialistic West, and that Truth has no history, yet like any other communist he, too, seeks historical evidence in everything. This pathetic state of his being ultimately leaves him a thoroughly confused fellow neither a communist nor a patriotic Indian. (64)

Comrade Kirillov presents a stage of development of the novelist. The novel discloses the essence of Vedanta Philosophy. Kirillov’s confusion leads him to failure. His fascination towards Marxism was caused by a trendy motive. He lacks the true knowledge of the required qualities that may lead him to the enlightenment. His deep obsession with Communism brings him no concrete result. Thus, Kirillov’s confused personality revealed by the narrator R. ascertains that the novel manifests the Vedanta philosophy.



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.j.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Reference:

- Alterno, Letizia. *Raja Rao: An Introduction*. Cambridge UP, 2011.
- Dey, Esha. *The Novels of Raja Rao: The Theme of Quest*. Prestige Books, 1992.
- Niranjan, Shiva. *Raja Rao: Novelist as Sadhaka*. Vimal Prakashan, 1985.
- Pandey, Rakesh Kumar. *Raja Rao: A Critical Study*. ASR Publications, 2013.
- Paranjape, Makarand. *The Best of Raja Rao*. Katha, 1998.
- Rao, Raja. *Comrade Kirillov*. Orient Paper Backs, 1976.
- Sachdev, Medha. *Raja Rao's Novels: Indian Philosophy Fictionalized*. Indian Publishers Distributors, 2005.
- Singh, Krishna Nandan. *The Cultural Fabrics in the Novels of Raja Rao*. Aadi Publications, 2020.
- Tripathi, J. P. *Raja Rao: The Fictionist*. B. R. Publishing Corporation, 2003.