

## Sriram's Shift to Extremism from Gandhism: A Study of

### R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*

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#### ABSTRACT

*The rise of nationalism in a nation bearing the burden of colonialism often means a change in its people's understanding of who they were, and what defines their identity and sense of belonging at present. New symbols, icons, songs and ideas start redefining the boundaries of communities and people rise above the personal goals and motifs to stand together as one force against imperial bondage. In India too, the growth of modern nationalism runs parallel to the anti-colonial movement. It was the time when the commoners realized their unity during their struggle with colonialism. They all could identify with the feelings of common oppression that they suffered at the hands of the British which further connected them all in spite of their differences against a common enemy. Mahatma Gandhi was one such force that brought the nation together and held the people together close enough to fight and attain freedom for their nation.*

**Keywords:** *commoners, communities, colonialism, imperial bondage, nationalism.*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Sriram goes through various stages of transformation in his life after he meets Gandhi. Though Sriram is inducted in the freedom struggle by his attendance to the meetings of Gandhi, his career in the freedom struggle is not just characterized by Gandhian ideology. He happens to come in contact with the ideology of extremists after Gandhiji is sent to jail and Bharati courts arrest. Sriram does not go to jail on the pretext of meeting his grandmother. In a way, the author tries to incorporate the freedom struggle as a whole by depicting not only the struggle of moderates but also that of the extremists. The author goes about it through the interaction of Sriram with Jagadish.

Jagadish appears as a photographer in Malgudi and claims that he has got a formula to jeopardize the Britain in India. He is an extremist freedom fighter and arrives there to install a small two-way radio set to transmit and receive code messages. Sriram falls prey to his influence on two accounts. First, he is alone and directionless after Bharati's arrest. Second, Jagadish coaxes him into believing that he and Bharati are good friends. Sriram has no way of finding out the truth. He aids Jagadish in the hope that he can arrange a meeting with Bharati. Sriram's ignorance of another line of struggle for freedom is depicted thus:

'We are waging a war, remember. Mahatmaji in his own way and we in our own. All our aims are the same.'

'But I thought we were all working out the Mahatma's orders.'

'We are, we are,' he said vaguely. 'I used to be a devout follower too. I'm still one, but he's no longer there to guide us. What can we do? He permits us all to carry on our work to the best of our abilities.' (WFM 147)

Jagadish makes use of Sriram's love for Bharati and ultimately gets him in line with his own agenda:

Sriram was happy to find a kindred soul and at once poured into his ears his own feelings. 'I told Bharati not to be a fool...'

'Don't say that. In this matter we all judge and act individually. Those who cannot follow Mahatmaji's orders are free to act as they think best'. The other said, 'This is a war in which we are engaged, we are passing through abnormal times, and we do what we think best.'

(WFM 2)

Jagadish installs the radio in Sriram's room. Then he uses the temple as the center of his activities by transforming it into a fortress. Sriram follows the instructions of Jagadish devotedly. It is evident in the confession of Sriram that he "had become a blind slave of Jagadish" (WFM 24).

Jagadish is a staunch follower of Subhas Chandra Bose. He has been secretly carrying out the agenda of propagating Bose's ideology and drawing cadets to his campaign. The narrative includes a speech of Bose:

Subhas Chandra Bose's voice said, 'Men of the Indian Army, be patriots. Help us free our dear Motherland. Many of your friends are here, having joined the Indian National Army, which is poised for attack on your borders. We are ready. We shall soon be across, and then you can join the fight on our side. Till then don't aim your guns at us, but only at the heart of our enemy'. And then followed a ten-point programme of National Service that the men of the Indian Army should undertake. (WFM 25)

Sriram receives messages on the radio while Jagadish is away and writes them down. After a long time he starts feeling useful again. Sriram gets drawn towards the Jagadish's campaign gradually. In the course of his writing, he hears Bose's Speech:

Sriram sat up respectfully. 'What good fortune that I should hear his voice!' At the sound of it, Sriram felt reverence for this man who had abandoned his home, comfort, and security, and was going from country to country, seeking some means of liberating his Motherland... Sriram wrote at breakneck speed. He felt as if the commanding presence of Subhas Chandra Bose himself was at his elbow dictating. He filled up several sheets of the pad in respectful silence.

(WFM 26)

Sriram is disappointed at the end of the speech when the radio breaks down. Sriram feels very disappointed at not being able to hear the speech. He is horrified when Jagadish fills in the missing portions of the speech on his own. This indicates how the common masses sometimes get misled with words which have no credibility. A friction seems to creep in the coordination between them due to Jagadish's self centredness. However, Sriram

remains faithful to Jagadish and goes to stick pamphlets in the Army quarters, a task which Jagadish assigns to him. Sriram is fully aware of the dangers involved in the task but he does not hesitate even for a moment:

Before parting, Jagadish said, 'We shall probably all three of us get shot in this enterprise. But don't bother. Our lives are not very important. Our work is more important.' 'I don't care whether I live or die,' said Sriram. (WFM 27)

Sriram sets out to the army quarters following Jagadish's directions. He catches a bus and reaches his destination. When he is about to cut a portion of the barbed wire fence, panic seizes him. For the first time, he begins to doubt his decision. As a result he withdraws himself from the active involvement in the extremists' campaign. In this regard it is worthwhile to note what Dr. M.K. Naik observes:

His lack of genuine faith in the cause of the freedom struggle also makes Sriram a coward and cowardice and freedom go ill together. Thus, he is asked to distribute copies of Subhas Chandra Bose's message to the Indian Army in the army camp at Belliali, but he loses his nerve when he approaches the barbed wire fence. (Naik 28)

Sriram's association with Jagadish is broken when he gets a letter from Bharati directing him to pay a visit to his grandmother at once. As a result, he arrives at 14 Kabir Street only to learn that his grandmother is dead. She rises from the pyre at the cremation ground. All this while the Police is searching for Sriram. He disguises himself but gets caught by the police and subsequently put in detention at the Central Jail. This is the conclusion of his association with Jagadish the extremist ways. Harish Raizada sums up the whole episode in the following:

While leading a lonely and dejected life in the ruined temple hidden from public gaze, he meets Jagadish, a terrorist and a zealous national worker. He joins his new friend in his terroristic activities and helps him first in noting down the messages and speeches of Subhash Bose from Tokyo and Berlin and circulating cyclostyled copies among the Indian soldiers and afterwards in overturning and derailing trains, cutting telegraph wires, setting fire to the records in law courts, exploding crude bombs, and indulging in such other acts of violence. This makes the police announce heavy price on his head. One day as he goes to see Bharati in the prison house and his dying grandmother at his own house, he is traced by the police and put behind the bars. (Raizada 29)

The episode of the Sriram's company with Jagadish throws light on significant features of the theme of 'Freedom Struggle'. It reflects that *Waiting for the Mahatma* dwells upon the theme of freedom struggle comprehensively with due scope for the extremist and moderate factions of freedom fighters. Also, it shows the influence of extremism on Sriram and his change of loyalty from violent to non-violent mode of freedom struggle which implies that Sriram is superficial in his commitment as a Gandhian freedom fighter. On a larger canvas it displays the fact that in the absence of results, the youth turned to violent means. Gopad also says at one point that if Mahatma had not led him on the path of Non-violence, he too would have gone the way of his brother. The young Sriram's response to Jagadish's invitation to join his campaign is governed by his directionlessness at that point and the fact that Jagadish says a few things which were in accordance with his own bent of mind at the time. He has a half-baked resolution which falters between Gandhi's words and that of Subhas Chandra Bose. When he suffers from desolation, Jagadish mentions that he and Bharati are working for the same cause

and he mistakes Jagadish to be a follower of Gandhi and volunteers himself to support him subsequently. P.K. Singh elaborates it thus:

His separation from Bharati (after her arrest) deviates him from Gandhian path to the way of terrorist movement. The agony of the separation turns into the fire of violence and his peaceful protest into the turbulent agitation. (Singh 38)

It is indicative of the inclination of narrative as swaying towards Gandhian freedom struggle by depicting Sriram ultimately moving away from Jagadish to Bharati. The struggle of Subhash Chandra Bose to free India through non-violent mode is narrated through Jagadish. He arrives at the place and opens a new window to the world in the form of a radio set. Sriram gets an exposure to an alternate world while they are together:

All day long he sat up with the radio behind the god, with a writing pad on his lap, and a pencil between his fingers, taking down the news and messages coming from Rangoon, Singapore and Germany, which purported to give the hour-to-hour progress of the war in Europe and the Far East. (WFM 148)

He is impressed by the speech of Bose too. The depiction of Bose's mode of freedom struggle adds a holistic picture to the theme of struggle in the novel:

Britain will leave India with a *salam*, if we crush the backbone of her administration'. He was always talking in terms of backbone... Sometimes he said: 'Britain's backbone is, you know where?' (WFM 31)

Jagadish cyclostyles the important news and circulates them from his photo studio. Obviously some of the content is false as we have seen in the episode of failure of the radio set at a critical moment. Sometimes false rumours are spread as we hear from a villager while going to Belliali, "But someone says it is all false! My brother knows a lot of people and he said that the English are being defeated everywhere. He said that the Germans are already in Madras. If they come, will they release our Mahatmaji from prison" (WFM 157)? The atmosphere hangs heavy with the preoccupation of people with the war. Even the bus conductor curses the passengers saying, "Do you want to kill yourself? Why don't you join the army and die if you want to die" (WFM 147)? The episode dealing with Subhash Chandra Bose has not been developed fully in order to restrict the theme only to the Gandhian movement. Only the theme of national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi becomes dominant. In the forthcoming episode, Jagadish tells Sriram that if he assists him on some business about Chrome ore, he will arrange a meeting with Bharati. When Sriram asks who will be benefitted by this, he says:

Well, the country. A train load of chrome ore is leaving a certain railway station for England.

It should not reach the port. If it reaches the port, it will return to us in the form of triggers and what not and plague us... I can't think of anyone but you to assist me in this job. (WFM 161)

Sriram's photograph is published and a reward is declared for him. Jagadish is careful and continues running his studio. In the following three weeks Sriram sets fire to the records in half a dozen law courts in different villages; he derails a couple of trains and paralyzes work in various schools, explodes a crude bomb, tars out 'V' for victory and writes 'Quit India' over the emblem. He becomes reckless and starts enjoying the excitement and

novelty of this game with the police. Yet he has his own doubts about the relevance of all this. Once he asks Jagadish:

Do you think Britain will be affected by this fire?

Jagadish declared unequivocally, 'Churchill will already know of it. It will make him groan. It will make him sit up. It must go on and on every hour of the day, all over the country, until Britain tells us, "We are bundling ourselves out tomorrow, do what you like with your country".'

Sriram asked next, 'I wonder what Mahatmaji will say about all this!'

'I don't know, Replied Jagadish. 'It is not his line. But when the results turn out satisfactorily, I'm sure he'll say, "You did well, my boy".'

Sriram felt doubtful. He shook his head. 'I'm not sure.' (*WFM* 169)

Sriram is hurt when he goes to visit his grandmother and Kanni compares him to a bandit saying, "I never thought the young master I had known so long ago could ever grow up into a Zigomar" (*WFM* 175). This puts him back on the Path of Gandhi and he does not try to run away when the police come to arrest him. At the central jail Sriram asks for privy arrangements in the jail on the ground that he has not yet been tried and proved guilty in the court. But his request is denied to him. He is not regarded as Gandhi's man but as a dangerous person by the I.G. and kept in company of forgers, murderers, housebreakers and pickpockets. They laugh at him because they don't understand why he joined the extremists "because someone wanted him to do something, and not because such exploits as derailing a train brought him a share of profit. This was a fresh outlook that had not occurred to Sriram in his self-centered political existence" (*WFM* 193). He stays in jail till the country attains freedom; his fancy ideas of jailbreak in the beginning slowly give way to practical reality. When the political prisoners are released, his name is not in the list. The British have quit India. On the advice of the chief he submits a representation for his release. On coming out of the prison he meets Jagadish. A disillusioned Sriram looks at the album he has put together and thinks, "if only I had known that people would reduce it all to this. I didn't go about inscribing "Quit" and overturning trains just to provide a photographer with material for his album" (*WFM* 228). He wonders why he had ever been associated with him.

Sriram returns to his place and finds that Bharati has gone to Noakhali to join Gandhiji in his mission to bring peace to the victims of communal violence. A letter arrives from Bharati asking Sriram to come to Birla House in Delhi. Bharati is present at the railway station to receive him. The plot of love story of Sriram and Bharati and the plot of the story of freedom struggle are skillfully merged together towards the end of the narrative. Sriram admits to Gandhi that he had strayed from the path of Non-violence when Bharati was not there. Mahatma says the fault was Bharati's in leaving him behind, but Sriram truthfully owns up that he was the one that didn't go to jail when she asked him.

Sriram and Bharati succeed in getting the consent of Gandhiji for their marriage. Gandhiji is portrayed to agree not only for their marriage but to perform the marriage rituals himself. At this juncture, a sudden change is brought into the plot that Gandhiji is assassinated while he is in the prayer. Thus the narrative ends with an anticlimax. In a way the climax is deliberate to sustain the novel not as a novel of love but as a novel of Freedom Struggle.

*Waiting for the Mahatma* contains several movements of Indian Freedom Struggle not only under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi but also under that of Subhas Chandra Bose. Under the leadership of Gandhiji such programmes as Khadi movement, Quit India Movement, Dandi March, Boycott of Foreign goods, Salt Satyagraha, Voluntary Poverty, Courting arrest and non-violence movement etc., are incorporated in the narrative. In addition, Gandhi has been included as a central character in the novel. Under the banner of Subhas Chandra Bose, the campaign of military and the concept of the Indian National Army are subsumed. Finally the novel has successfully depicted the transformation of freedom struggle into a mass movement or national movement and its subsequent triumph to win freedom. Therefore *Waiting for the Mahatma* can be regarded as true narrative of Indian Freedom Struggle beyond any doubt.

## II. CONCLUSION

Harish Raizada has called the novel 'the most ambitious of R.K. Narayan's works'. Haydn Moore Williams views it as Narayan's most mature novel. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, R.K. Narayan has made a bold venture not only in incorporating Gandhi as a character but also in portraying Gandhi dynamically. Gandhi appears twice in the narrative. In the first instance, he is portrayed as a master campaigner, champion of the untouchables and guardian of his disciples. His influence on the people helps to transform the freedom movement to the People's Movement or Mass Movement. Various activities of the Gandhian Movement get momentum. At the same time the narrative does not turn a blind eye to dissidence that prevailed against Gandhian Campaign especially with regard to the eradication of untouchability and rejection of foreign goods. In the second instance, Gandhi appears on the grave day in the Birla House in Delhi when he got assassinated. The narrative provides a comprehensive picture of the national movement at the advent of Gandhi and dignifies Gandhian Movement.

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