Comrade Kirillov : a Critique of the Communist Strain in the Composite Mind of Raja Rao

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A close look at the fictive output of Raja Rao would reveal that all his novels are concerned with the different autobiographical facets of his composite mind and culture. Rao’s mind is not the mind of a partisan. It is next to impossible to pin him down ideologically. Was he a Gandhian? Was he a liberal? Was he a Vedantic? Was he a romantic? Was he a rationalist? Was he a nationalist? Was he a cosmopolitan? Was he a communist? The honest answer would be yes and no. He was all this but not exclusively so. His mind and culture were essentially syncretic and synthetic.

The penultimate novel, Comrade Kirillov (1976), as K Sharma points out is “a purposeful critique of communism”. Comrade Kirillov, actually an Indian named Padmanabha Iyer, seems to be the Marxist alter ego of the novelist. The epigraph of the novel reveals that the treatment of theme and the portrayal of the protagonist are directly derived from Rao’s fascination for Dostoevsky. Rao’s Kirillov has Dostoevsky’s Kirillov as prototype. He has many of the traits of Shatov and Kirillov of Dostoevsky’s The Possessed. The author used the protagonist to present a satiric picture of pre-Independence and early post-Independence Indian political scenario. Employing the narrative device of the witness-narrator technique, Raja Rao also makes references in this novel to the Theosophical movement, Gandhian Buddhism and Vedantic philosophy. But what distinguishes it from other novels is that it has two witness-narrators and not one. The first and main witness-narrator is ‘R’ (Raja Rao himself) who is a true Vedantist and a Gandhian. The second is Irene, the Chek wife of Kirillov. These two witness-narrators are complementary to each other and help the reader to comprehend the meaning of Kirillov’s life and his ideological persuasion. What is extraordinary about this novella is that unlike the earlier novels it does not attempt to present any sustained mystic parallels. But some of them have been employed with a view to highlighting, modifying and expounding the salient traits of the protagonist’s mind. The use of myth and symbol serves as an aid to understanding not only the theme of the novel but also the proper comprehension of the various characters in their respective situations.

As suggested earlier, in the portrayal of the theme and characters Raja Rao seems to have been influenced in this tenuous work of fiction by the great Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). Dostoevsky’s Kirillov is an atheist. Raja Rao’s Kirillov, too, considers God as “the fiction of the lazy”. While he professes his interest in communism in common with Dostoevsky’s Kirillov, he shares with Shatov the love for his national heritage which is reflected in his recitation of Sanskrit verses from Indian classics. His deep inherent love for India is of a piece with Shatov’s fervent love for Russia. It is obvious that Rao’s Kirillov is a composite of his Dostoevskyan namesake and Shatov.
In one of his letters to Prof. MK Naik, Raja Rao has gone on record, saying, “The use of Kirillov from Dostoevsky is to show how one is a prisoner of ideology”.3 The Indian Kirillov is a clear parallel to the Russian in being something of an irresolute character. MK Naik very rightly points out that these “numerous affiliations between The Possessed and Comrade Kirillov should not…. make one hastily conclude that Raja Rao’s sole aim in the novel is to offer an ironical portrait of an Indian communist on the line of the expose of Russian radicalism in Dostoevsky’s novel”.4 There is a considerable difference between the Russian and the Indian novels in terms of the treatment of theme. The Indian Kirillov maintains his faith in communism while the Russian loses his faith in Russian radicalism. The theme of Comrade Kirillov is indicative of the disapprobation of communism as it is represented by an Indian. Kirillov’s adherence to communism vis-à-vis his attachment to Theosophy and Gandhism reveals him as something of an ideological muddle. Raja Rao has deftly employed a unique artistic technique of presenting a single personality cleft in two–Kirillov and ‘R’–by exaggerating the typical aspects of a vertical Brahmin in ‘R’ (actually Raja Rao himself) and of an ‘inverted’ one in Kirillov. Arguably, Kirillov may be an externalization of a suppressed element existing in Raja Rao’s own mental make-up which has deeply inspired him during his stay in France to be closely associated with the Socialist movement in Paris, particularly with French trade union leaders and Trotskyites. But unlike Kirillov, Rao never turned a Marxist. Their logics belong to different dimensions, but their sentiments converge on the point of identity. Besides his innate love of Sanskrit and India, Comrade Kirillov has visited the ashram of Sri Raman Mharishi as did Rao. Kirillov’s personality is a strange mixture of contradictory elements whereas Raja Rao (‘R’), a cousin to Kirillov as described in Comrade Kirillov is a staunch Brahmin upholding the unmixed values and ideals of an orthodox traditionalist. In Raja Rao’s personality the saintly metaphysician and the progressive liberal are not at loggerheads as they are in that of Kirillov. Rao is endowed with the perfectly balanced attitude of a highly enlightened intellectual who can arrange the things in his mind in their right places even as he visualized them in the right perspective linking them to some metaphysical truths.

Notwithstanding Kirillov’s ideological commitments not being quite marked by categorical convictions, the novel remains a parody of Indian protestations of communism. Padmanabha Iyer is a typical South Indian Brahmin who displays his great interest in the metaphysical tradition of India. As he himself points out, “P is an inverted Brahmin”.5 This seems to be supported by Naik when he observed, “While his intellect subscribes to Marxism, his heart obstinately continues to wear its Brahmanical sacred thread though he hates to admit the fact”.6 Kirillov is deeply rooted in the Brahminic culture of his land and the narrator R. is very right when he points out that his Indianhood would put an end to his faith in communism. R ridicules Kirillov’s communist stance because he possesses Brahminic habits and the compassion of a Catholic priest.

Like Raja Rao himself, Comrade Kirillov is an ambivalent character. As he says, “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”.6 He has a profound love and reverence for India and for all that is poetically grand in the Indian tradition. He loved India “with a noble, delicate unreasoned love”.7 The novelist says further:
...Kirillov was an Indian, and he had peculiar reactions which no dialectic could clarify. He could almost speak of India as though he were talking of a venerable old lady in a fairy tale who had nothing but goodness in her heart, and who was made of morning dew and mountain honey”.8

A modern educated Indian is a victim of a crisis of identity. It is this crisis that accounts for the ambivalence in Kirillov’s character. In fact, ambivalence may well be said to be the keynote of his character. Both the narrators—‘R’ and Irene—focus on this particular trait in Kirillov. The Novel begins with R’s description of his personal appearance. His face is “ancient and enigmatic”9 and “his coat flapping a little too fatherly on his small, rounded muscles of seating”10 and his tie has “a praterplus-parenthetical curve, as though much philosophy had gone into its making”11. The complexities of his mind and thinking have been made apparent by these descriptions of the narrator who calls himself a bundle of opposites. ‘R’ finds Kirillov childlike in certain ways:

He was so like a child, was Kirillov, when it comes to simple things.12

As Irene writes in her diary, “P can sometimes, as all childlike people, be boringly banal”13. “P’s illogic is so astonishing”14. The narrator has rightly summed up his character as, “the Sadu of communism”15

Intellectually, he is an ardent Marxist, but emotionally he is a true Brahmin, taking meticulous care of his sacred thread. But he hates to acknowledge these contradictions. Kirillov’s Character is a study of a person who is caught in powerful ideological subtleties and the complexities of modern world and is torn between intellectual pursuits and his emotional undertow. He adores all that is noble and good in Indian thought and life and rejects unhesitatingly all that is obsolete and otiese. He rejects even Gadhijee because “non-violence is a biological lie”16 and observes:

“Your Gandhi is a kleptomaniac... Ask your Gandhi to read Freud—he would be the wiser for it”17

But rather paradoxically, he cannot tolerate even a single word spoken against Gandhijee, though he himself uses more severe words about him than Churchill might ever have done. He was proud of his heritage. But if Irene spoke of India, “She was silenced be his ecclesiastical look”18. He simply remarked, “What do you know Irene”19 Though he leaves for Moscow and then for Peking, he sends his son to India to know his rich cultural and spiritual heritage, so that his love for India and her spirit may live through Kamal.

Rao proclaims his protagonist to be an “inverted Brahmin” probably in the sense that as a Marxist, and quite unlike a true Brahmin, he has placed the material ends of life over the spiritual. As a true spokesman of India and all that is best in Hinduism, the protagonist remains a simple and unified personality. But the hold of an alien ideology on his mind causes all the complexity in his character. The equation in his case is reversed, as he
uncritically receives what the West has to give to a rational and inequisitive mind, changing
the Brahmin into an anti-Brahmin. Yet the conflict between honesty of mind (the intellectual
loyalty to Marxism) and honesty of being (the emotional pull of being a Hindu) continues. In
the conflict lies as revealed through Irene’s diary, the Marxist danger, especially to an ancient
people like the Indians.

Undoubtedly, the crux of Kirillov’s character as well as the theme of the novel rests in
the dangerous position of an Indian communist who after all remains a mere convert to an
alien ideology preserving in his subconscious his deep rooted affiliations to an age–old
cultural heritage. As such, instead to remaining a twice born, like many others of his type, he
becomes a thrice-born leftist who despite all his logic and sense of history, can never
suppress the twice-born altogether.

It should be clear by now that the dichotomy of Kirillov’s mind derives directly from
the irreconcilable immiscibility of his political ideology and spiritual predilection. The
persistent note of cynicism is conveyed through the violent grouping of heterogeneous ideas,
mundane and spiritual. For the communist God is negation. For the Hindu, on the other hand,
it is communism that is annihilation. To quote the narrator himself:

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And \text{ once you have fed the Indian millions and given them
nice houses to live in, and railways for their monthly
holidays, and sanatoria for their sick, and maternity care for
their mothers, and the Dnieperstock for the electric
illumination of India—what then, brother, is to become of
your despair, your emotional upheavals, your metaphysical
yearning, your God ward beckonings?}^{22}
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He seems to be everything adding up to nothing. His simultaneous allegiance to
Marxism and Gandhism appears to be the outcome of a conflict in his subconscious mind
between his communist affiliation and his love for Indian identity. His criticism of Gandhi is
an offshoot of his proclaimed loyalty to the communist party which found in Gandhism a
formidable challenge to Marxism in the pre-Independence era. The narrative obviously offers
an ironic portrait of an Indian communist who is torn between his emotional attachment to
the spiritual values of India and his political persuasion.

The incorporation of Irene’s diary goes a long way in highlighting the theme of
Kirillov’s inward conflict which is only partly revealed in the main part of the novel. It makes
the novel a powerful character study and adds to it a psychological perspective. The conflict
that seems to torment him is between assertive idealism and innate emotionalism. Through
the diary Rao builds up a unique thematic design and uses it in a way that the two warring
aspects of the hero’s self are brought out into sharper relief.

That the communist strain in the mind of Raja Rao was too much of a strain for him to
carry into a fictional fulfilment and fruition is evident from the restlessness dogging the mind
of Comrade Kirillov right till the end. Very much like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Comrade
Kirillov is find himself to be homeless at home, belonging neither to this world nor to that–
something of an intellectual Trishanku. The best way to comment on the cleavage in the mind of Kirillov is to quote the author himself: “The main point in this novella is to show how one can be sincere and honest–and yet fundamentally dishonest”.  

Works Cited:


