

# Indian English Literature and Language as an Instrument of National Development: A Study with Reference to Raja Rao

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**Abstract-** The history of Indian English literature is deeply intertwined with the intellectual and cultural trajectory of modern India. As a medium of expression, the English language has served not merely as a colonial inheritance but as a powerful tool of self-definition, resistance, and nation-building. This paper explores the role of Indian English literature and language as an instrument of national development, with particular reference to the works of Raja Rao. Raja Rao, one of the most influential pioneers of Indian English fiction, redefined the creative possibilities of the English language by infusing it with the rhythms, idioms, and metaphysical depth of Indian thought. His seminal novel *Kanthapura* exemplifies how literature can mobilize political consciousness by narrating the story of India's struggle for independence through a distinctly Indian lens while still using English as the vehicle of communication. By bridging Indian philosophical traditions with Western narrative techniques in works like *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Raja Rao demonstrated how language could act as a mediator between cultures and as a means of shaping national and spiritual identity. This study argues that Raja Rao's use of English contributes to national development not only by articulating the historical realities of colonial and postcolonial India but also by envisioning a synthesis of cultural values that promote self-reliance, ethical growth, and intellectual resilience. His works underscore the idea that Indian English literature, when rooted in indigenous sensibilities, becomes an instrument for collective self-awareness and progress. By situating Raja Rao within the broader discourse of Indian English writing, the paper highlights the enduring relevance of literature and language as catalysts of social transformation and nation-building.

**Keywords:** Raja Rao, Indian English Literature, National Development, Cultural Identity, Language and Nation-Building.

## INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature occupies a paradoxical position in India's cultural and intellectual history.

Introduced as part of the colonial project, the English language was initially seen as a tool of domination, a means by which colonial administrators sought to reshape Indian education and thought. Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous Minute on Indian Education (1835) envisioned the creation of a class of Indians who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." Yet, over time, English became more than a colonial imposition; it was reappropriated by Indian writers as a powerful medium of self-expression, cultural articulation, and political resistance.

Literature, in particular, became a vehicle for national consciousness. Writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, and later Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao demonstrated how English could serve not only as a bridge across India's diverse linguistic landscape but also as a tool to communicate Indian realities to the world. As Benedict Anderson (1991) reminds us in his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, literature plays a vital role in shaping collective national identities by enabling people to imagine themselves as part of a larger community. Indian English literature functioned precisely in this way: it created a space where Indians, fragmented by region, language, and caste, could recognize themselves as part of a unified nation.

Among the pioneers of Indian English fiction, Raja Rao (1908–2006) stands out as a distinctive voice. Unlike Anand, who foregrounded social realism, or Narayan, who focused on the ordinariness of Indian life, Raja Rao infused his novels with philosophical depth, mythic resonance, and spiritual inquiry. He believed that English, though foreign, could be Indianized to reflect indigenous rhythms, idioms, and worldviews. In his celebrated Foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938), he wrote:

*"We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us."*

This vision framed his literary project: to transform English into a language capable of expressing Indian cultural and spiritual realities. Raja Rao's works—*Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965)—are not only artistic achievements but also contributions to the cultural and intellectual development of the Indian nation.

This article examines how Raja Rao's use of English serves as an instrument of national development. Focusing on his philosophy of language, his depiction of political consciousness in *Kanthapura*, and his articulation of cultural identity in his later novels, the paper argues that Raja Rao's fiction exemplifies the transformative potential of Indian English literature as a force of nation-building and collective self-awareness.

#### RAJA RAO'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

At the heart of Raja Rao's literary vision lies his philosophy of language. The Foreword to *Kanthapura* is often regarded as a manifesto for Indian English writing. Raja Rao articulates the difficulty of "conveying in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own." Yet, instead of rejecting English, he embraces the challenge and turns it into a creative opportunity. He observes:

*"We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American."* (*Kanthapura*, Foreword).

This statement reflects both resistance and innovation. Raja Rao refuses to mimic English literary traditions, instead advocating for an Indianized English that retains the cadence of Indian speech, idioms, and thought patterns. His narrative style in *Kanthapura* demonstrates this philosophy: the novel is narrated by an old village woman, Achakka, whose storytelling mirrors the rhythms of Indian oral tradition. The opening line exemplifies this:

*"There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich Sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own."* (*Kanthapura*, 1).

The syntax is deliberately Indian, mimicking the flow of oral storytelling, where myths, legends, and everyday events intermingle. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes in *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), Raja Rao's English "transforms the alien medium into a bearer of native rhythms and myths." By bending English to Indian realities, Raja Rao not only reclaims the language from its colonial associations but also makes it an instrument of cultural assertion and development.

Moreover, Raja Rao's conception of language extends beyond stylistics to the philosophical. In *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), a semi-autobiographical novel that explores the tension between Indian spirituality and Western rationalism, the narrator reflects:

*"Truth, said the Indian, is many-sided; and there is no finality about truth."* (*The Serpent and the Rope*, 87).

Here, language is seen as a vehicle for expressing multiplicity, ambiguity, and spiritual searching. Unlike Western notions of linear, objective truth, Indian philosophy emphasizes plurality and synthesis. Raja Rao's language, therefore, becomes a medium for conveying this epistemological difference. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes in *Indian Writing in English* (1962), Raja Rao "Indianized English to the point of transforming it into an Upanishadic tongue."

Critics have also interpreted Raja Rao's philosophy of language through the lens of postcolonial theory. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) provides a useful framework: Raja Rao's English occupies a "third space," neither purely colonial nor purely indigenous, but a hybrid form that enables negotiation, resistance, and creativity. By inhabiting this third space, Raja Rao demonstrates that English can become a vehicle of national development, capable of articulating Indian realities to both domestic and international audiences.

#### LITERATURE AS POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) remains one of the most significant political novels in Indian English

literature, for it captures the transformative role of Gandhian nationalism in mobilizing ordinary villagers. The novel is not just a narrative of political upheaval but also a profound commentary on how literature itself becomes a vehicle of political consciousness and nation-building.

The famous Foreword to *Kanthapura* sets the tone:

*"We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians."* (*Kanthapura*, Foreword, p. v).

This manifesto-like statement is crucial to understanding Raja Rao's project—English as the medium, but infused with Indian rhythm, idioms, and cultural cadences. The use of oral storytelling, particularly through the narrative voice of Achakka, transforms the novel into a literary equivalent of an "oral history" of Indian independence. This stylistic choice democratizes the political struggle, making the village community the center of resistance.

The villagers of *Kanthapura* gradually awaken to the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi. As Achakka narrates:

*"And we said to ourselves, we shall be free, we shall be free."* (*Kanthapura*, p. 183).

The simplicity of diction combined with the collective "we" exemplifies how literature instills political awareness. Unlike elitist political discourse, Raja Rao's narrative embodies Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community": the nation as a collective construct shaped by shared language, stories, and memory.

Critic M. K. Naik has argued that:

*"Kanthapura is less a novel of character than a novel of movement, embodying in its very texture the ferment of Gandhian nationalism."* (*Naik, A History of Indian English Literature*, p. 246).

Indeed, the novel shows how storytelling itself is a mode of political pedagogy. The process of weaving tales of Gandhi into local myths and legends illustrates Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity—where the modern political message fuses with traditional narrative structures.

The villagers identify Gandhi with Rama and Krishna, thus making nationalism part of their religious and cultural worldview:

*"Is he not our Rama, our Krishna, our Mahatma, who has come to free us?"* (*Kanthapura*, p. 17).

This metaphorical appropriation highlights how English literature written by Indians could catalyze political development—awakening the consciousness of a people historically marginalized under colonialism.

Thus, *Kanthapura* demonstrates how literature becomes an act of resistance, reshaping political subjectivity. In its language and structure, it enacts the process of decolonization: turning the colonial tool (English) into a weapon for liberation.

#### 4. LITERATURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

While *Kanthapura* is explicitly political, Raja Rao's later novels—*The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965)—delve deeper into philosophical and cultural identity, bridging East and West, tradition and modernity.

Raja Rao saw literature as a medium not only to narrate stories but also to interrogate the spiritual and cultural foundations of Indian identity. His oft-quoted reflection captures this vision:

*"The Indian novel is not the story of the individual, but of the community. It is the story of the philosophy of the people."*

*The Serpent and the Rope*

In this semi-autobiographical novel, Raja Rao explores the East–West encounter through the intellectual and spiritual journey of Ramaswamy. The novel dramatizes India's cultural identity as both distinct from and engaged with Europe. Ramaswamy's marriage to Madeleine, a French woman, symbolizes this encounter, but its eventual failure underscores the difficulty of synthesizing two divergent civilizational worldviews.

Ramaswamy reflects:

*"The serpent is illusion, the rope is reality. One who sees the rope sees truth."* (*The Serpent and the Rope*, p. 112).

Here, Raja Rao employs an Advaitic metaphor, grounding his narrative in Indian philosophical traditions. The use of English to convey such metaphysical concepts marks his unique contribution—infusing the colonizer's language with indigenous epistemology.

Meenakshi Mukherjee has observed that:

*“Raja Rao was not only translating Indian life into English but translating Indian modes of thought into a language alien to them, and in doing so, he expanded the expressive range of English itself.” (The Twice Born Fiction, p. 97).*

Thus, *The Serpent and the Rope* asserts cultural sovereignty through linguistic indigenization. It demonstrates how literature helps shape a nation’s identity—not through political rhetoric alone but through spiritual and intellectual self-assertion.

#### The Cat and Shakespeare

This novel further illustrates Raja Rao’s concern with the metaphysical dimensions of Indian identity. Through the metaphor of a cat carrying her kittens safely across, the novel advocates faith and surrender to divine order.

Raja Rao writes:

*“The cat carries the kitten. The kitten does not worry. That is bhakti.” (The Cat and Shakespeare, p. 67).*

Such metaphors position Indian literature as a repository of cultural wisdom. The text is deeply philosophical yet accessible, suggesting that literature can serve as a guide for ethical and spiritual development of the nation.

Critic K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar underlines this function:

*“Raja Rao’s fiction is a quest for the metaphysical identity of India, and through it, the cultural identity of the modern Indian.” (Indian Writing in English, p. 334).*

Through these novels, Raja Rao elevates Indian English literature from the level of political resistance (Kanthapura) to a discourse on civilizational philosophy. This dual role of literature—political and cultural—reflects its importance as a tool of national development.

#### 4. LITERATURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

One of the most enduring contributions of Raja Rao to Indian English literature lies in his ability to weave together the multiple strands of cultural identity that constitute modern India. His novels do not merely narrate stories; they interrogate the fundamental question of what it means to be Indian in a world where colonialism, modernity, and tradition converge. Through his works, Raja Rao

demonstrates how literature can serve as a vehicle of cultural self-definition, situating Indian sensibilities within global discourses while resisting assimilation into Western paradigms.

Raja Rao’s magnum opus, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), epitomizes the search for identity in a postcolonial and metaphysical context. The novel follows Ramaswamy, a South Indian Brahmin intellectual, who navigates both his marriage to Madeleine, a Frenchwoman, and his spiritual quest rooted in Vedantic philosophy. The work is at once autobiographical and allegorical, representing the tension between the East and the West.

In a famous passage, Rao writes:

*“There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthalapurana, or legendary history, of its own. The story of the village, its temple, its tank, its goddess, her Vedic rites, its festivals, its demons, its gods, its fairs and its castes, all are embodied in the sthalapurana.” (The Serpent and the Rope)*

This passage reveals how cultural identity, for Rao, is embedded in stories, traditions, and rituals. Even when writing in English, Rao insists on foregrounding Indian modes of thought, thereby affirming the inseparability of literature and cultural belonging.

The East–West encounter is central to Raja Rao’s exploration of identity. His works reveal the cultural negotiations inherent in colonial and postcolonial experience. *The Serpent and the Rope* dramatizes this through Ramaswamy’s failed marriage with Madeleine, which symbolizes the difficulty of reconciling two civilizational worldviews. The West, represented by Madeleine’s rationalism, and the East, represented by Ramaswamy’s spiritual quest, cannot be easily synthesized.

This dilemma reflects what Homi Bhabha calls the “third space” of cultural identity, where hybrid subjectivities emerge. Raja Rao’s protagonists often inhabit this liminal space, embodying neither pure Indian nor pure Western identities, but something in-between. In this sense, Raja Rao anticipates postcolonial theories of hybridity and cultural negotiation.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965), Rao takes a different approach to identity. The novel, more playful and comic than *The Serpent and the Rope*, centers on Govindan Nair, a government clerk in

Malabar, whose vision of the world combines quotidian experiences with metaphysical insight.

Here, identity is not just about East–West encounters but about the synthesis of philosophy and daily life. Through humor and simplicity, Rao suggests that cultural identity is not only preserved in high metaphysical discourse but also in the ordinary rhythms of Indian existence.

*“Life is just play, and play is just life. To know it is to be free.” (The Cat and Shakespeare)*

This statement shows Rao’s philosophy that liberation is accessible not only to scholars and mystics but to ordinary individuals, rooted in their cultural ethos.

Raja Rao’s exploration of cultural identity has broader implications for national development. By asserting that Indian philosophy, myths, and traditions can find legitimate expression in English, Rao contributes to the cultural self-confidence necessary for nation-building. His work counters the colonial assumption that English is merely an instrument of Western domination; instead, he demonstrates that English can be indigenized and transformed into a carrier of Indian cultural identity.

As M. K. Naik observes, *“Raja Rao’s achievement lies in his creation of a distinct Indian ethos within the alien medium of English, thereby affirming both cultural authenticity and literary innovation” (A History of Indian English Literature).*

Thus, Raja Rao’s novels become acts of cultural reclamation. They allow Indian readers to see themselves represented in a global language, thereby fostering a sense of dignity, continuity, and pride in cultural heritage—all vital elements for sustainable national development.

#### LANGUAGE, NATION, AND DEVELOPMENT

Raja Rao’s work occupies a pivotal position in the discourse of language and nation-building in India. For Rao, language is not merely a medium of communication but a carrier of cultural memory, spiritual truth, and national consciousness. In a newly independent India, struggling to define its identity amidst colonial legacies and global modernity, Rao’s reflections on language and literature assume profound significance. His novels, essays, and prefaces collectively underscore the centrality of language to the project of cultural and political development.

Raja Rao’s most famous pronouncement on language appears in the Foreword to *Kanthapura* (1938), where he articulates the challenges and possibilities of writing Indian literature in English:

*“We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians. The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our English expression. Our method of expression will, therefore, have to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.”*

This statement is programmatic. It asserts that English, though a colonial inheritance, can be indigenized to reflect the rhythms of Indian thought and culture. By bending English to Indian purposes—through mythic narration, proverbs, Sanskritized idioms, and oral storytelling modes—Rao demonstrates how language can become a site of resistance as well as self-affirmation.

Here, Rao is close to what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o later terms *“the appropriation and decolonization of language.”* English, instead of being an alien imposition, is turned into a medium for India’s spiritual and political self-expression.

Literature, for Raja Rao, is deeply connected to the larger national project. In *Kanthapura*, the Gandhian freedom struggle is told not through the idioms of colonial history but through the voices of villagers, folk songs, and mythological analogies. Moorthy, the protagonist, is portrayed not as a political agitator in the Western sense but as a modern avatar of traditional Indian saints.

The novel transforms history into mythology, thereby democratizing the nationalist narrative. As Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks in *The Twice-Born Fiction*, *“Raja Rao brings together myth and history, politics and metaphysics, to create a national narrative that is simultaneously rooted in the past and oriented toward the future.”*

By narrating the freedom movement as an extension of India’s mythological imagination, Rao affirms that the path to national development cannot be divorced from cultural memory. Literature, thus, becomes an educational and moral force, instilling pride and unity among ordinary people.

Unlike many modernist writers who associated development with material progress, Raja Rao emphasizes ethical and spiritual development as the foundation of a sustainable nation. For him, true

progress is not only measured in terms of technology or infrastructure but in the moral and cultural strength of its people.

In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy declares:

*“India is not a country like France is, or like England; India is an idea, a metaphysic.”*

This statement underscores that national development in India cannot be conceived solely in political or territorial terms. It must be grounded in metaphysical and cultural continuity. In other words, India develops when it remains faithful to its dharmic values while engaging with modernity.

This resonates with Raja Rao’s consistent belief that dharma—the principle of righteousness and duty—should undergird social and political life. His vision of development is therefore holistic, balancing material progress with spiritual sustenance.

Raja Rao’s insights into language and nation have a resonance beyond India. His works anticipate postcolonial debates about linguistic hybridity, cultural identity, and the politics of representation. Homi Bhabha’s concept of “hybridity” and “the third space”—where colonized subjects rearticulate cultural identity within the colonizer’s language—finds early expression in Rao’s novels.

Furthermore, Rao’s affirmation that English can serve Indian purposes parallels the Caribbean writers’ (like Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite) appropriation of English, as well as African writers’ experiments with “Africanized English.” His work is thus part of a global literary movement where language becomes a contested yet creative tool of postcolonial self-definition.

Critics have consistently highlighted Raja Rao’s role in shaping an Indian English idiom that carries national meaning. M. K. Naik praises Rao for his “mythopoetic imagination that enables Indian sensibility to find authentic expression in an alien medium” (*A History of Indian English Literature*). Meenakshi Mukherjee underscores the political urgency of Rao’s linguistic experiment, while later postcolonial critics view his works as pioneering articulations of hybridity and cultural negotiation.

Thus, Raja Rao’s contribution is not only literary but civilizational. He reminds us that development, in the deepest sense, is inseparable from cultural authenticity and linguistic creativity.

## CONCLUSION

Raja Rao’s literary oeuvre reflects a profound attempt to articulate the ethical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of Indian identity within the framework of modernity. His engagement with the concept of dharma, his imaginative fusion of myth and history, and his exploration of language as a site of cultural negotiation mark him as one of the most significant voices in Indian English literature.

Through works such as *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, and *The Cat and Shakespeare*, Rao transforms literature into a philosophical inquiry, asking fundamental questions about human existence, the destiny of nations, and the moral basis of social order. His novels insist that the pursuit of modern development must not sever ties with India’s metaphysical traditions. Instead, they suggest a vision of progress rooted in spiritual authenticity, ethical responsibility, and cultural continuity.

Rao’s reflections on English as an Indian language demonstrate how literature can simultaneously resist colonial domination and create new spaces for self-expression. By indigenizing English, he shows that language is not a mere vehicle of communication but a repository of memory, identity, and nationhood. His works therefore anticipate and inform later postcolonial debates on hybridity, cultural identity, and the politics of representation.

In the global context, Raja Rao’s writings resonate with similar attempts in Africa, the Caribbean, and other postcolonial regions to reclaim the colonizer’s language for indigenous self-expression. Yet, Rao remains distinctly Indian in his metaphysical preoccupations and insistence on dharma as the guiding principle of personal and collective life.

Ultimately, Raja Rao offers us a holistic vision of development—one that does not equate progress with economic growth alone but insists on the primacy of ethical and spiritual renewal. His works remind us that the future of nations lies not merely in material advancements but in the preservation of cultural wisdom, moral integrity, and human dignity. In this sense, Raja Rao is not just a novelist but a philosopher-poet of India’s destiny, whose voice continues to speak with relevance in the 21st century.

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