

# Repercussions of Techno-Economic Change in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in A Sieve*

## Abstract

In the modern world technology is ushering a change that was unexpected. Technology is basically a western construct which was meant for controlling nature, technologies in the East was not meant for controlling nature, rather it was meant for surviving along with nature. So the change that has come in societies like India is surprising. For example in India, the joint family system is on the verge of collapse due to establishment of new industrial centre. Similary divorce which was unheard of in the traditional Indian society has increased multifold. There are many writers who have written about the problems faced by the society due to technological onslaught. The current paper is a study of Kamla Markandaya's novel *Nectar in the sieve*.

**Keywords:** Society, Change, Technology, India.

## Introduction

In all societies and at all periods of time a change has been observed. Change being the law of nature denotes a difference in anything observed over some period of time. The rate of change differs from society to society. In some societies it is fast and rapid while in others it is slow and gradual. The prominent factors which affect and determine the rate and direction of social change include the biological factors, the physical factors, the cultural factors and the technological factors. The biological factors include the plants, animals and human beings in that area. The non-human biological environment also affects the human social and cultural life. How the other living things affect the life is evident from this Children's poem:

I'm a part of every living thing  
And every living thing is a part of me,  
We are all created of this sacred earth

So everything's our sacred family (qtd.in Pal, Virender, 2010, 107)

The physical factors take into consideration the geographical changes as well as the occasional convulsion of nature as storm, earthquakes and floods. The idea has been elaborated by Theodore Roszak while delineating the relationship between surrounding and human mind (qtd. in Pal, Virender 2012, 47). The physical environment governs the social conditions and a change in them leads to a change in social life. Every culture on a large scale depends on the physical setting and the various elements of culture possess varying degrees of changeability.

## Objective of the Study

With the advancement of technology human beings are getting alienated. Earlier the children used to sit near their grandparents and used to listen to their stories, but not idiot box (TV) has changed the equations. Now the children prefer watching TV instead of listening to the stories. Many such changes have crept into our lives. The aim of this paper is to study the changes that have occurred in our lives due to the penetration of technology as described by Kamla Markandaya in her novel.

## Review of Literature

The important influence of technology in the modern world has been studied by many scholars. Virender Pal has written many papers studying the influence of technology on native societies. His paper "Salvaging Culture and Community: Uncertain Reclamation in Kim Scott's *True Country*" (Pal, Virender 2014) studies the negative influence of technology on the Aboriginal society and how the Aborigines of Australia are trying to retain and revive their culture in the midst of technological onslaught. His paper "Mining and Mental Health: Colonial Policies



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and the Aboriginal Condition" (Pal, Virender 2012) studies the impact of new industrial practices and economic activities like mining on the traditional societies. In a paper entitled "U.R. Ananthamurthy's Crusade against Caste: The Text and Context (2017) Virender Pal has studied the novel of U.R. Ananthamurthy where the novelist has argued that advancement in technology is necessary for advancement of society. Similarly Theodore Roszak has studied the influence of technology on human psychology in his celebrated book *The Voice of the Earth* (1992). Similar is the case of David Watson who wrote about the negative influence of machines in his book *Against the Megamachine* (1998).

Culture not only influences our social relationships, it also influences the direction and character of technological changes. Technology affects society for it has a marked influence on the attitudes, beliefs and customs of the people. Technology is a western concept and the westerners used technology to exercise control over nature. The west did not "advocate any relationship with the land" (Pal, Virender 2011, 255) so the use of technology is different in East where the idea of controlling nature does not exist. It has been observed that the most pervasive phenomenon of our age is mechanization. These changes in a society have been closely observed by the writers who have with great sensitivity portrayed them in their literary works. One amongst the prominent writers who were sensitive to these changes was Kamala Markandaya.

Kamala Markandaya, a prominent Indian writer, was basically a product of two worlds - the world of native sensibility and world of Western knowledge. She nourished the idea that the Western culture had slowly but surely associated itself to a considerable extent into the fabric of Indian life and culture had moulded the ways and lives of the Indian people. She was sensitive to the tensions and conflicts caused by the technological invasion and had awareness to the onslaught of modern technology that had led to the disintegration of the traditional Indian society. Her fictional world reflects her concern about the gradual change in the attitudes, beliefs, and ideas of the people generated by the urbanization and science and technology advancement in India. She has put forth the evil effects of industrialization on the agrarian Indian society and her works portray the changing India both in terms of rationality and spirituality. Her people in the world of fiction who had long adhered to the deep rooted habits find themselves caught unawares by the sudden intrusion of modernization along with its impact. Her realism and penetration in portraying the rural India has not only rendered the soul of India to the Western world, but it has simultaneously opened new vistas of insight for the modern educated elite of India residing in the urban areas.

Kamala Markandaya in her novel *Nectar In A Sieve* sets the drama of struggle of life against the innumerable odds in an unnamed South Indian village, which stands as a representative of the myriads of the villages of South India. The novel unfolds the toil, torture and tragedies of a peasant's

life against the background of village which shows signs of a slow but sure emergence of the modern industrial life. Industry, the gift of the Western world and culture, though necessary for the development of a nation has many negative effects. It not only acts as a major assault to the agricultural society but its growth means the peasants being uprooted from their land and their surroundings, the oppression of the common man and the vulgarization of the traditional life and culture leading further to a steady devastation of the old forms of social organization and old ideologies including the disintegration of the traditional joint family. According to K.M. Sambasevian:

Industrialization has contributed much to family disorganization. In its result most of the important ties that bind all family members together in an agricultural society began to loosen. Again, the worker unaccustomed to the work life in the factory also becomes disorganized and in such a condition is not able to enjoy the richness of the family.... The joint family, so common in India, is gradually disappearing.

*In Nectar in a Sieve*, the tannery symbolizes the modern world of science, industry and technology and also stands as a representative of the future force of progress. The impact of tannery is an impact of an alien culture on Indian life which is gradually but surely seeping deep into the Indian soil. India, under its influence, is in a state of transition from a traditionally agriculture based society where people lived in a relaxed mood and enjoyed an easy life to a fast moving life full of odds and tensions.

Rukmani, the central character of the novel, "*Nectar in A Sieve*" is married to a poor tenant farmer, Nathan. Throughout her life she adopts herself according to the man - made laws and the man's point of view decided her fate. She, with her strong willpower finds solace and happiness even in the area of suffering. Her life moves on without much change till the advent of a major techno-change in the form of tannery. The tannery not only disturbs the life of Rukmani and Nathan but the lives of all the simple villages.

The tannery finds its establishment at a time when the octopus of hunger had raised its ugly head as a result of repeated vagaries of nature - at times drought and at other times excessive and unseasonal rain. There was no crop for agricultural produce and people were on the verge of starvation forced to eat grass.

The drought continued until we lost count of the time. Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more.... (NS, 77-78)

The changed scenario had started engulfing not only peace and happiness of the village folk but also their values and simplicity. They were forced to sell their possessions like clothes, vessels etc. for their survival. The tannery like a mythical demon had turned the entire village into a spiritual wasteland. Survival became very hard and the prices of basic commodities rise. Rukmani sees the filthiness and commercialism caused by tannery a threat to the village life. She cries in utter despair: Our money buys less and less (NS 46).

The tannery had spoiled the beauty of nature. The cool sequestered way of life in the village stands invaded by way of life in the village dirt. The townspeople came with cart - loads of bricks, stones, cement etc. to build the hideous superstructure. Their supervisor directed the operations "with loud voice and many gestures but doing not a stroke of work himself." (NS, 26) The proprietor, "the red-faced whiteman" does not live in the village but only 'comes and goes' thus laying the foundations of an industrial society that found its basis in the principles of exploitation of labour and absenteeism. The tannery not only transforms the village environmentally and economically but it also transforms the relationships between the people within the village. The entire innocent environment stands polluted and is replaced by greed, ambition and immorality. Drinking, gambling and whoring become a routine matter and shoddiness, haste, new hazards become a way of life. Rude hooligans could be seen roaming about in the streets:

It is all noise and crowds everywhere and rude young hooligans idling in the street and dirty bazaars and uncouth behaviour and no man thinks of another but schemes of money. (NS, 46).

The filthy commerce, a result of tannery, was visualized every where. The death of Rukmani's son in the trouble of tannery finds money to be his substitute. When the people from the tannery talked about compensation to Rukmani for her dead son, she shockingly reacts : "What compensation is there for death?" (NS 91)

Rukmani perceives that the tannery would be responsible for their undoings. The modern technology, in the guise of tannery had started spreading like weeds in an untended garden, strangling whatever came in its way. She finds it hard to accept the tannery people as one of them and comments: They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are turned from tilling to barter, and board our silver since we cannot spread it, and see our children go without the food that their children gorge and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were .... (NS, 28).

Every month the tannery expanded and swallowed the land of someone resulting in the decrease of the number of villagers who lived by land, leading to the crumbling of the traditional rural way of life. The people were forced to evacuate their lands and be uprooted. Nathan finds that his long cherished

dream to see his sons 'besides' him and he teaching them the ways of the earth is shattered. His sons showed no interest in the rented fields and tannery was a good substitute to earn more money and overcome poverty. The eldest son of Rukmani and Nathan, Arjun, joins the tannery, a western creation, followed by his younger brothers. One by one, Nathan's four elder sons leave the village and he feels helpless. This feeling of helplessness is basically a representative of the same feeling of the Indian rural folk which is caught in the sweep of modernization and industrialization. The traditional Indian agricultural life had started disintegrating under the impact of Western ways and technology. Nathan and Rukmani stand as representatives of thousands of peasants who had suffered as a result of industrial economy and had found themselves uprooted. Truly, as long as a man has his roots he lives and perishes if he is uprooted.

In *Nectar In a Sieve*, Nathan had his roots deep in his land and he survives all odds of life before being uprooted from his land. He was able to face with courage and determination the misery and starvation caused by unprecedented rains and drought. The tannery swallows up their land and they stood evicted and dispossessed. His roots gone, Nathan like an uprooted tree could not live long and ultimately dies. He falls a victim to the impersonal power, fate or destiny. His alienation from the land makes him depressed and tired and finally he gives off the struggle of his life.

Rukmani reflects that the tannery had given them good times also but they seem to be distant, "almost belonging to another life- we have lost more than we had gained or could ever regained. Ira had ruined herself at the hands of the throngs that the tannery attracted.....My sons had left because it frowned on them; one of them had been destroyed by its ruthlessness. And there were others its touch had scathed. Janaki and her family, the hapless Chakkli Kannan, Junthi even....." (NS, 134).

This in fact, is an important point made by the novelist in the context of a modern industrial establishment like a tannery because there is another South Indian novelist U. R. Ananthamurthy whose literature is severely critical of Brahmins for not joining "modern professions" (Pal, Virender 2017). The differing points-of-view clearly establishes the different ways of perception of the same thing.

Rukmani, at another place compares the past with the present : At one time there had been kingfishers here, flashing between the young shoots for our fish; and paddy birds; and sometimes, in the shallower reaches of the river, flamingoes, striding with ungainly precision among the river reeds, Now birds came no more, for the tannery lay close - except crows and kites .....(NS, 69) this comparison shows the village life in transition where the times have changed and the conflicts and tensions are everywhere which are basically a result of the modern industry.

This transition and change was admired by some people, like Kunti, in the village and the response to the constructions of tannery was a

positive one. Kunti says to Rukmani: Are you not glad that our village is no longer a clump of huts but a small town? Soon there will be shops and the tea stalls and even a bioscope, such as I have been to before I was married. You will see (NS, 29)

At another place, Kunti while reacting at the wages her two eldest sons had from the tannery says: "You see", said Kunti, "The tannery is a boon to us. We are no longer a village either, but a growing town....." (NS, 46).

#### **Conclusion**

Despite some positive attitude towards the tannery, the basic factor remains that the families of rural India are disintegrating under the impact of techno-economic changes. The disintegration of the family of Nathan and Rukmani is a representative of the disintegration of the rural way of life under the impact of modernity. The suffering of the rural dwellers is accentuated as a result of a wider conflict between the agrarian and the industrial way of life. Though industries are necessary for the development of a nation, they are also the first assault on the simplicity and innocence of rural life. The modern man is now a lonely, alienated creature living as an island into himself. It is true that in the forward march of human civilization, no country including India, can afford to isolate itself from the contemporary scientific spirit. At the same time the fact remains that along the path the innocence and vitality of the Indian heritage and tradition stands affected. The only way of survival

is to change and mould with the times for as Nathan also comments. "There is no going back. Bend like the grass that you do not break." (NS, 28)

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