

Munshi Premchand's *Godan* as a Story of Peasant Subjugation

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Abstract—This research paper is going to focus on *Godan* as a story of Indian Peasants and their oppression. This novel which is set in the pre-colonial era, takes us through the lives of peasants in India. *Godan*, which means 'the gift of a cow' is a novel that circles around the lives of Hori and his family, who represents the peasant society of India. No doubt it is a sober novel concerning swift socio-cultural changes in contemporary society. It is entirely surrounded with the dreadful part of life of poor peasants' Hori the protagonist of the novel on whom the whole novel and the calamity revolves. The unwell treatment meted to the peasants and their struggle throughout their life to come out of it. They borrow money from the so called zamindars or landlords keep them bounded throughout their life, in spite of their repaying the loan the amount goes on doubling and even their children sometimes are compressed under those conditions and generation after generation fall in to the trap and give way to death. Munshi Premchand being a grand novelist, a short story writer has studied the life of peasants and deals with their social problems, their wretched predicament and subjugation of the Harijans the down trodden cast.

Keywords: Exploitation, Peasants, Oppression, Subjugation, Landlords, Down Trodden, Class, Predicament, *Godan*, struggle, exploitation, Trouble, Rich, Poor.

Introduction

The novel brings out the troubles encountered by the pastoral society due to the political system. With the help of this tale Premchand makes us observe the troubles faced by the peasant society during colonial era. Till the end, we can see struggle for a living, in this story. Across the world Premchand is considered one of the supreme writers of modern India. He wrote both in Urdu and in Hindi and is celebrated as an expert narrator in both languages. *Godan*, usually known as Premchand's masterwork, is a tale of peasant India. It highlights the tension between the peasant and the money-lender supported by a variety of forces. It presents a farming population with its hard work and uncomplicated pleasures, its exploitations and melancholy, its frustrations and hopes. Premchand's creativity and pragmatism are at their best in the

formation of some of the vital characters, mostly that of Hori, who emerges as an everlasting sign of the Indian peasantry. In the art of painting the rural world, no writer in India has been such a master. Critics in Hindi have tended to see it as a chronicle of Indian rustic life, whose hero 'Hori' is exemplary Indian peasant in his gentleness and kindness. It has a large picture of grand dimension and the characters are common village folk take on an epic splendor before our eyes. In this novel Premchand lashed out at the evils of land lord's as well as industrialization.

Here Premchand represents the India's sorrowfulness in Hori's character. With this the writer has definitely given a fresh prologue to the Hindi novel, for him a novel is a social and historical text and his novel writing has a social responsibility.

Godan and the Plight of Peasants

The tale begins with Hori buying a cow from Bhola, a cowherd. The coming of the cow is a symbol of esteem. Hori, with the help of the cow, earns a few annas more by selling its milk. Envious and jealous of Hori, his brother, Heera poisons the cow. When police arrives for enquiring about the cow's death, Hori bribes the police and is clever enough to remove his brother's name. Jhunia, Bhola's daughter gets pregnant by Gobar, Hori's son. Fearing of the villager's action, Gobar runs away. Dhanai, Hori's wife, shelters Jhunia and again Hori has to tolerate the load of debts because of sheltering a low class girl. Everybody tries to burden Hori. Then Hori lays all his hopes on his son, Gobar. But Gobar denies to help him and Gobar settles in the town with Jhunia. Largely through the portrayal of 'Hori' we are shown the unending tragedy of the village peasants life caught in the clutches of the blood sucking money lenders as well as rigid unrelenting dogmas of society, the life of the poor village peasants is an eternal hell. The poor peasants toil like machines suppressing their sensibilities forgetting that they are human beings but what do they gain in the end? Nothing but misery.

The money lenders like hungry dogs charge excessive rates of interest and diminish the peasants to a situation beyond penury. They desire to make plentiful expenses in order to continue

their so called status and their expenses were met with the sheer destruction of the peasants. The peasants live beyond the poverty line. They cannot get even the basic amenities of life. As Hori says: “we don’t expect to become rulers, and we’re not asking for a life of luxury. All we want is just some coarse cloth to wear and some coarse food to eat.....but that is even impossible”. (Godan, p 225)

The awful plight of the peasants is reflected not only through the central characters of Hori and Dhania but also through various minor characters like Girdhar. After the sale of sugarcane, Girdhar is returning with his money. But the greedy money lenders are just waiting for this chance. After paying back his debt to Jehnguri Singh, he returns penniless. He gets drunk to drown his sorrow.

A great turmoil was necessary indeed to change the whole abusive set up. Land lords like Raisaheb even subjugated the peasants. But Raisaheb justifies his stand to Hori. He explains that he was rich did not make him happy. He had his own share of troubles and worries. His main trouble was keeping up his face and maintaining his status in front of the other zamindars.

Besides a tragic narrative, there are various humorous touches. Once such a funny incident is the skit presented during the event of Holi. But the humour again reflects nothing but the catastrophe of the peasants’ life. I quote “A peasant is shown holding the feet of Jehnguri Singh the money lender. After much pleading Thakur agrees to pay the loan of Rs 10. But he just pays him Rs 5. At this peasant is taken a back.

“There are 5 Rs my master”.

“There are 10 go and count again at home”.

“No sir they are five”

“One Rupee goes for gratification, Right?”

“Yes Sir”

“One Rupee for paper itself Right?” “Yes Sir”

“One as my customary fees. Right?”

“Yes Sir”

“One as my interest Right?” Yes Sir

“Five Rupees in cash. That makes ten rights?”

“Better keep these five too with you”

“Nonsense!” (Godan, 267-68)

The life peasants is one everlasting tragedy and still they have not toughened into distrust. They do not let go the chance of enjoying the festivals that are celebrated in the village. In spite of all the oppressions and troubles which they endure at every moment of the day. Enthusiasm of life is not subdued. Their ability to breathe the joys of life has not died. Whenever there are weddings and festivals they enjoy themselves to their heart’s content.

One more reality which adds fuel to the calamity of the peasants is that they are the prisoners of a convention ridden society. They let the conventions dictate them. For e.g Hori wants to give dowry to his daughter ‘Sona’ even though her husband and father-in-law do not insist it. This is because of conventions and to maintain his prestige. And if at all they raise their voices against conventions of society they are punished. It is when Hori and Dhania accept the pregnant Jhunia who has formed an illegitimate relationship with their son Gobar they are fined by the punches.

The character of Hori takes on a tragic splendor and the novel really reaches its tragic climax at the end. Hori hitched his younger daughter Rupa to a middle aged person Ramsevak Mehto in order to protect his land too, which was the only leftover of his inherited possessions. But in spite of so many torture he doesn’t lose the struggle of life, he keeps on struggling till the end.

But still in the facade of death destiny does not spare the peasants. After Hori’s demise the villagers advise Dhania to offer cow in charity. Having no cow and no cash to purchase a cow, Dhania gets out twenty annas which she had preserved and seats them in chilly palm of her spouse. After that she says to Datadin that this was the all money and that was all she could give. After saying this she collapsed and sank into the ground.

The demise of Hori represents total crumple of the peasant utopia and of the pathway of obedience and cooperation. The departure of Hori’s family from the peasant way of life and the exit of his son Gobar to the town, for livelihood are also representative of the definitive fate of villagers and peasants and of the ultimate victory of cash nexus over the old society. This death of a peasant of the old type as in other words is representative of the death of old society which could not be rehabilitated from within. The old-fashioned society must pass away for the fresh one to be born over its remains; this is clear message of Premchand as communicated through Godan.

Conclusion

Premchand shows class peasant oppression prevalent in Indian society before independence in his classic novel Godan (1936). It exhibits the lot of poor and demoralized peasants exploited by the higher castes and also by Zamindars, moneylenders, darogahs etc. Some critics have, actually, drawn symbolic parallelisms between the vicissitudes of life that Premchand had to go through and the tough and brutal realities of the life of peasant Hori, the male protagonist of this epic of rural India. The various strata of village society, their daily vagaries, their attitudes, all put together, bring to life the whole village customs in Godan. His depiction of the village, therefore, has much to say about the tyranny of Zamindari system with its bloodsucking landlords and their plentiful aids plundering on the peasant. Premchand in Godan portrays the subjugation meted out to inferior class peasants and to untouchables also. The troubles of the distinctive peasant vis-à-vis the mahajans, is touchingly told by Premchand in the disastrous story of

Hori's life in *Godan*. To purchase bullocks he has borrowed from Mangaru, to sow potatoes from Datadin, and to give his brothers their share of the family assets from Dulari. Far from clearance of the principal amounts, he is not even capable to keep up the payment of interest on the three loans. The inevitable outcome, though protracted in its painful unfolding over the whole of Hori's running life, is the loss of everything, changeable or unchangeable that he could call his own. So humiliating and efficient is the method of subjugation. Thus Premchand accomplished in presenting the improbable circumstances of peasants and underdogs in the Indian society. Premchand exhibits how the peasants have been dominated by zamindars and money lenders.

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