

GODAN AS A TRAGIC STORY OF A VILLAGE PEASANT

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ABSTRACT

Munshi Premchand being a great novelist, a short story writer has studied the life of peasants and deals with their social problems, their miserable plight and oppression of the Harijans the down trodden cast. My paper is going to focus on Godan as a tragedy, usually tragedy deals with drama but here I am going to portray it with a serious novel. No doubt it is a serious novel about rapid socio-cultural changes in modern society. It is totally bounded with the tragic part of life of poor peasants' Hori the hero of the novel on whom the entire novel and the tragedy revolves. The ill 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 crushed under those circumstances and generation after generation fall in the trap and succumb to death.

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Tragedy is usually associated with a drama, but here it is associated with a serious novel 'GODAN'. In Indian philosophy the concept of Godan has a very special significance, "Godan means a gift of a cow". The village people of India consider the cow to be the highest possession. For the Hindus serving the cow is a paramount duty. In Hindu mythology it is believed that a soul can attain **Nirvana** only by crossing the river Vaitrani and crossing the river is only possible with the help of a cow. If after the death of a person a cow is given in charity then the cow will come to the rescue of the soul.

Godan forms the summit and apex of Premchand's work as a writer. It is a landmark in Indian literature. This novel was a climax towards which all Premchand's writings were tending. No writer in India has been such a master in the art of painting the rural world. Critics in Hindi have tended to see it as a saga of Indian rural life, whose protagonist '**Hori**' is archetypal Indian peasant in his meekness and humanity. It has a large canvas of epic dimension and the characters are ordinary village folk take on an epic grandeur before our eyes. It has in fact been described as 'The Mahakavya of the Indian farmers life'

In this novel Premchand attacks the evils of land lord's as well as industrialism, whether in field or in factory the toiler was suffering excruciating agony. Here Premchand symbolises the India's sorrow in Hori's character. With this the writer has indeed given a new introduction to the Hindi novel for him a novel is a social and historical document and his novel writing has a

social obligation. He is interested in realistic portrayal of human life. In Premchand's writing we get a clear view of social tendencies in the novel.

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. They go on suffering all the exploitation and eventually deposit their weary existence into the lap of fate looking at this plight of the peasants Prof. Mehta reflects I quote.

'They remained unconcerned even in the face of revolution submitting to innumerable tyrannies. It seemed as if their soul had been extinguished that they had become unconscious of their very existence only a cataclysmic upheaval could shake them out of their torpor' unquote.

The money lenders like greedy dogs charge exorbitant rates of interest and reduce the peasants to a condition beyond penury. They want to make lavish expenses in order to maintain their so called prestige and their expenses were met with the utter devastation of the peasants. As Hori says, I quote **'The Raisaheb frittered away 20,000 rupees on his son's marriage and nobody raised a finger, Mangru the money lender spent 5000 Rs on his father's cremation and nobody questioned him. The poor also have sons and father's'** unquote.

The peasants live beyond the poverty line. They cannot get even the basic amenities of life. As Hori says, I quote **"we don't want luxuries; we want plain food, some cloth and life with honour. Even these we are denied."** Unquote.

The deplorable predicament of the peasants is reflected not only through the main characters of Hori and Dhania but also through certain minor characters like Girdhar. After the sale of sugarcane, Girdhar is returning with his money. But the hungry money lenders are just waiting for this opportunity. After paying back his debt to Jehnguri Singh, he returns penniless. He gets

drunk to drown his sorrow. He tells Shobha and Hori, I quote **“believe me I am not drunk. Believe me. How can i get drunk on an anna? I am just, pretending Ha Ha I am so happy uncle. I’ve paid back the loan I took twenty and paid back a hundred and sixty. Some loan that!”** Unquote.

The fantastic attitude of the peasants also contributes the tragedy of their life. The submissive peasants quietly bear their cross and blame it on fate. When Gobar tries to explain Hori that the Raisaheb is exploiting him, Hori remarks I quote **“if we don’t wait on him life will get from bad to worse. God has made us slaves and we have to put up with our lot”** unquote.

Dhania Hori’s wife is of the rebellion sort and like Hori she cannot accept the life of drudgery without reproach and questionings. She reflects I quote **“why so much obsequiousness for a life which did not provide even the daily bread?”** Unquote.

As Premchand comments on Dhania I quote **“Her mind would often rebel against such a state of affairs. But a few scolding from her husband would jolt her back into reality”** Unquote.

Peasants like Dhaniya would often raise voices. But who was there to listen to their anguished cries? Their voices were stifled. A great upheaval was required indeed to change the whole exploitative set up. Land lords like Raisaheb even exploited 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 problems and worries. His main problem was keeping up his face and maintaining his status in front of the other zamindars. He tells Hori, I quote **“How riches and fellow feelings never go hand in hand, we give in charity of course, but only to outshine our equals. Our benevolence smacks of vanity”** unquote. Whatever lavish expenditure he makes is all to uphold his prestige in the community. It seems as if wasting his whole life by entering into competition with his fellow zamindars. At one point Premchand writes I quote **“He did not wish to oppress his tenants but his hands were tied what could he do, he had to maintain his prestige was**

certainly not a just excuse for destroying the life of the peasants”. Unquote Premchand does convey this message to us though not perhaps in a direct manner.

The very title of the book Godan carries tragic reverberations. Godan in Indian culture is actually considered to be very auspicious. But this was not so for Hori. For Hori the cow becomes a harbinger of evil. The tragedy of Hori’s life revolves around the cow. The possession of the cow should have uplifted Hori financially but on the contrary the cow dies through Hira’s poisoning, bad times start for the family, problems upon problems pile up for the family including total financial ruin. Bhola had given the cow to Hori without taking money at that time, but on agreement of a later payment. Now Hori who is devoid of his cow and devoid of his money has to part with his pair of bullocks in lieu of a payment to Bhola. Taking away bullocks from a peasant is like cutting of his hands and legs. Even Dhania comments on the cow and says I quote **“the day her shadow fell here we have gone from bad to worse”** unquote.

Though the novel is by and large a tragedy, there are certain humorous touches. Once such a humorous incident is the skit performed during the festival of Holi. But the humour again reflects nothing but the tragedy 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!”

I mean it sir, 1 Rupee as my gift to your younger wife, one for elder, 1Rupee to buy betel leaves for the elder wife and 1Rupee for the younger that makes four. The fifth rupee is your funeral rites. Unquote.

Their life is one unending tragedy and still they have not hardened into cynicism. They do not let go the opportunity of enjoying the festivals that are celebrated in the village. In spite of all the oppressions and sufferings 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 marriages and festivals they enjoy themselves to their heart’s content. I quote

“The threats of money lenders and the oppressions of the underling of the zamindars cannot curb the villagers’ zest. It matters little, if the peasant starves or has no shirt on his back and no money in his pocket. His innate exuberance to enjoy life is irrepressible”
unquote.

As for e.g every year they celebrate Holi at the meeting place of Nokhey Ram. Here they prepared bhang sprayed colours at each other and held the Holi **nautch**.

Another fact which contributes to the tragedy of the peasants is that they are the prisoners of a convention ridden society. They let the conventions dominate them. For e.g Hori wants to give dowry to his daughter ‘Sona’ even though her husband and father-in-law do not demand it. This is because of conventions and to uphold 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 illicit relationship with their son Gobar they are fined by the punches.

The person who is oppressed by so many sorrows and tyranny may become indifferent to the society and the world. Sometimes they may also turn into hardened criminals but in the peasants

like Hori and Dhania the springs of nobility have not withered their innate nobility surfaces time and again in the novel.

At one juncture in the novel Premchand writes I quote: **“The notion that it is sinful to make capital out of others distress had become an inescapable part of his conscience.”** Unquote. Even when Heera, Hori’s brother poisons his cow out of jealousy and runs away, Hori in order to save the prestige of the family incurs debt and bribes the police so that he may not search Heera’s house. Even when Heera doesn’t return Hori takes very good care of Punia, Heera’s wife. Hori remarks I quote **“Quarrels don’t turn brothers into enemies”** unquote. Same is the case with Dhania, though she appears to be very aggressive outwardly she has a heart of gold. They accept Jhunia without fearing what the people of village may say. Datadin accuses Dhania of accepting Jhunia, Dhania retorts. I quote: **“I am not prepared to sacrifice a young girl’s life at the altar of false prestige.”** Unquote.

At the end the novel really reaches its tragic climax and the characters of Hori takes on a tragic grandeur. Hori marries his younger daughter Rupa to a middle aged person called Ramsevak Mehto in order to save his land too, which was the only remnant of his ancestral property. But in spite of so many suffering he doesn’t lose the battle of life, he keeps on fighting till the end. He dies working, he never accepts defeat, and he is not a passionate puppet in the hands of destiny.

But even in the face of death fate does not spare the peasants. After Hori’s death the villagers urge Dhania to give cow in charity. Having no cow and no money to buy a cow, Dhania brings out twenty annas which she had saved and places them in icy palm of her husband. And looking at Datadin says, I quote: **“Maharaja there’s neither a cow nor a calf nor any money in the house, this is all the money I have; this is all I can give. Take this in place of a cow.”** Unquote. And saying this she collapses and sank into the ground.

As A.R.Desai says Premchand put in centre of stage the peasants own submission and his own prowess to compromise and to make peace with his oppressors. Godan epitomises the tragic

finale of the path of compromise and submission. As depicted in the last burst of Hori the hero of Godan. I quote: **“Hori’s hand trembled. He hung his head and no word came. After a grim struggle of thirty long years he stood today on utterly defeated man-stripped, never able to rise again. He felt as if he had been lined up against a city wall and passersby in scores had spat on his face.”** **“Have pity on me”** he wanted to shout and tell him. “My life has been one long grind, ‘ve worked in the summer heat in the winter rains. Tear out my heart –see if there is any life left. Don’t spit on me please don’t spit on me. Ask me if I have rested in the shade. Why do you insult me always?” unquote.

The death of Hori symbolises total collapse of the peasant utopia and of the path of submissiveness and compromise. The ousting of Hori’s family from the peasant way of life and the exit of his son Gobar to the town, for lively hood are also symbolic of the ultimate fate of villagism and peasantism and of the ultimate triumph of cash nexus over the old society. This death of a peasant of the old type as in other words symbolic of the death of old society which could not be reformed from within. The old and antiquated society must die for the new one to be born over its ashes; this is clear message of Premchand as conveyed through Godan.

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