

## Premchand's Social Realism in Godaan

**Tamanna Priya**  
Junior Research Fellow  
Department of English  
Banaras Hindu University.

### Abstract

The paper looks at Godaan from the point of view of social realism which works as a strategy for self-realisation and social reform. The life of the Indian peasant as the perennial outsider is the problem that has gripped the imagination of the writer. This realism is important because it puts the individual face to face with the society. There is no way that a reader can look away from women's reality once the author has depicted their life and the alarming social disparities so accurately-all this amid the rise of the new found nationalist sentiment in a nascent India.

**Keywords:** Social realism, peasant, women.

Social Realism is a propaganda that reflects the reality of the society in social, political, economic, religious, and in every other context. It sensitizes the reader to make him/her conscious of the contradictions and conflicts in the society. It provides us proficiency or ability to question the existing social conditions rationally.

Premchand (1880-1936), being deeply committed to the cause of nationalist awakening, examines the social vices of the time. Social Realism lies in the centre of his writings. In *Godaan* (1936), Premchand articulates how orthodox economic development policies, orthodox learning

and practices, orthodox culture and tradition, can be a hurdle to social and economic betterment of the poor peasants. Hori's end conveys the idea that birth and death of Indian peasant is not significant. In other words, the life of the Indian peasant can be summed up in one line: "He was born, he suffered and he died."

The caste system marks the identity, social status, social life and importance of an individual. Its self-enforcing nature conquers even the most intimate level of Indian peasants that ultimately prevents them to rebel against the upper castes and hence lasts so long. In *Godaan*, Hori, the central character faced all kinds of hardships and suffered every injustice to maintain his standing in the caste system. As Hori knows, living "outside" the caste means,

"No social life (no one to have a smoke with),

No social support, No gatherings (like ear-piercing rites, No birth and death ceremonies),

No celebrations (like no Marriage sacrament),

No more loans, Social Dispossession, And even Physical Expulsion, and hence no life at all."

To Hori, there is no life beyond caste. He is nowhere without his caste. He is obsessed with caste because he is scared to be marginalized or demarcated.

Exorbitant interest rates and simple human greed (that of the brutal Zamindars, ruthless moneylenders and landlords) combine together to bind Hori hand and foot. Indebtedness is the principle of socio-economic fact of Hori's life that mercilessly squeezes him. This condition is perpetual and beyond life.

With Caste comes Class where it is the Lower Class who is forced to bear all the sufferings and hardships. We have created a society that is hierarchically structured in a graded inequality. Class is actually a ubiquitous synonym. It is an identity marker- a badge of Identity and it is a Differentiator as well- a marker of social distinction. Class is used as a form of oppression, imprisoning the lower class in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being. The luxurious and comfortable way of life of Upper Class is the result of peasant's blood. On the contrary, even the basic needs and amenities are denied to lower class. They go without food for days and wear tattered rags. All they want is to have coarse meals and coarse clothes but could not have even that.

The society depicted in *Godaan* is in transition from feudal to capital economy. The upper class took every possible means to exploit the lower class. The driving force behind this is Money. We know 'Money knows no bonds or boundaries'. Due to this 'Money culture', the network of human relationship is adverse. Like, Rai Sahib in the beginning is portrayed as someone who condemns the exploitation and oppression of the poor. But we see there is a contradiction between his words and practices. He orders to clear all the rent before ploughing, just for a party. Even Mr. Khanna exploits the poor in his mill by providing them very low wages. They represent capitalism's profit oriented exploitative nature.

Even the Religion does not come to the rescue of Indian Peasants. In *Godaan*, Religion is portrayed distorted and hypocritical. In the name of Religion, the poor peasants are ruthlessly looted and exploited. Religion serves as a tool to victimize the peasants. The notion of purity is totally misguided. The punishment for the same crime is different for the two distinct classes,

only by using the tool of Religion. Hori was imposed with fine on keeping Jhuniya in his house. The society abandoned him, labelling him impure. He was disrespected. He lost his dignity. While nothing happened to Matadin in his act of keeping a ‘*chamar*’<sup>1</sup> girl, Celia. Act of praying, chanting and charity cleansed his impurity and he was once again *accepted* in the society with the same honor and dignity- the consequence of a corrupt Religion.

Women, who are as much part of society as men are, are more exploited. They are the victims of both patriarchal and brahminical values. As we know, any moment passed would not be like the previous day. But there is a ‘uniqueness’ only in women community and that is – Identity Crisis, which always remains the same. All women are imprinted by patriarchy and Brahminical values. Patriarchy and Brahminical values define a woman’s role, her function, and her responsibility. Connected with man as daughter, wives and mother, their moral character is estimated by their manner of fulfilling duties. Fixed in hegemonic and totalizing conceptualization of “women” by the discourse of patriarchy, women have been reduced to silent onlookers in their own life. Uneven access to material and intellectual resources perpetuates their oppression.

Respect, Honor, Prestige – these terms occupy the domain of only men. In the novel *Godaan*, Hori acquires prestige and respect among the peasants because of his association with figures of power and authority like Rai Sahib. On the contrary, women as individuals have no prestige, honor and respect. They derive their status, prestige, honor and respect from her husband. They are denied the space for self-definition.

---

<sup>1</sup> A derogatory term denoting lower caste that has become a common name call.

When Dhaniya succeeds in condemning the inspector from searching the house, her courage was glorified by the society. She was seen as a divine figure. Her act of defiance was labelled as ‘supernatural’. This convenient use of supernatural shows that this act should not be taken as a conventional model for women but as something exceptional. Dhaniya’s courage and strength was *acceptable* only as a blessing by the goddess Bhavani. Her encroachment in the public domain (private domain is where a woman belongs) is not perceived as a conscious act of a woman, standing against the unjust and oppressive system. Her act is *acceptable* only because it has been conveniently sanctified.

Govindi, the wife of Mr. Khanna, we see, is marginalized in her own family. She appears in public sphere as well, but not as an individual but as someone’s wife. In the end, we see Govindi’s condition improves. This happens not by changes in her perception about herself, or realization of her own worth. Rather, it happens because of the change in her husband’s perception of her worth, virtues, and her importance to him and his family. It is Mr. Khanna, who is giver and denier of Govindi’s virtue, worth, importance and power.

Concludingly, Premchand captures the general, the typical Indian peasantry and its social life. Hori is not just an individual character but an Everyman- a representation of the whole Indian peasantry. Premchand’s continued references to Malti, Khurshid Ali, Mehta depicts Premchand’s belief in radical change that belongs to the domain of ‘possible’, an optimistic light to the pessimism that pervades the typical peasants’ situation. We see Malti in the public sphere on an equal plane with the men. She inherits confidence and self-worth. She asserts her position in the patriarchal society by breaking all the constraints of gender role and cultural roles. She is

no more enslaved by patriarchy. Hence, Premchand's *Godaan* exposes how orthodox structure and traditional culture is cynical and should not be preserved for the so-called betterment of the peasants. Rather, it should best be overcome for the very same purpose.

### Works Cited

Shelke, Vishnu. "Realism and Symbolism in Munshi Premchand's Godan.pdf." *Academia.edu*, 19 Nov. 2016, [www.academia.edu/29954839/Realism\\_And\\_Symbolism\\_In\\_Munshi\\_Premchands\\_Godan\\_pdf](http://www.academia.edu/29954839/Realism_And_Symbolism_In_Munshi_Premchands_Godan_pdf).

Sprinker, Michael. *Marxism and Nationalism: Ideology and Class Struggle in Premchand's Godaan*. [www.jstor.org/stable/466421](http://www.jstor.org/stable/466421).

Upadhyay, Shashi Bhushan. *Premchand and the Moral Economy of Peasantry in Colonial* ...[www.jstor.org/stable/25835717](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25835717)