

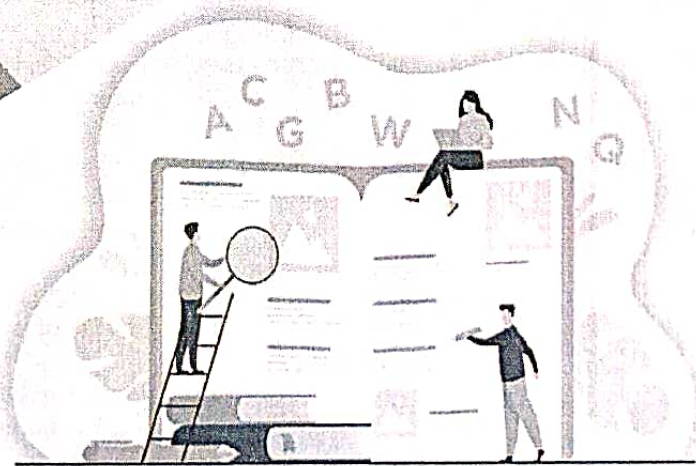
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Godaan: Criticism of Life

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Abstract

Prem Chand was the pioneer of progressive writing in Hindi novels. He studied social problems like a sociologist, and presented them like an artist, arousing noble emotions of love, kindness, charity, pity, etc. for the fellow beings, without any prejudices of caste, colour or race. Prem Chand also seems to say something similar as he presents the disparity between the rich and the poor, the Zamindar and the farmer, and also the emotions of love and sacrifice deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, as low as Chuhia and as high as Professor Mehta and Dr. (Miss) Malti.

Key words: *Exploitation, Devil, Criticism, Society, Struggle*

Godaan is a novel of epic dimensions, portraying the exploitation of the farmers though India was then a country of villages and dependent almost entirely on the labour of the farmers. Prem Chand has devoted more than half of the novel to the depiction of poverty of the farmers, represented by Hori. He had a life time ambition to own a cow, but it had become a task as difficult as buying a luxury. Hori had tricked Bhola into giving him a cow, yet the money-lender, Jhinguri Singh would not let him have the pleasure of owning a cow, and his own brother, Hira, poisoned the cow out of jealousy. Once lost, he could not get the cow again in his life time, except in his last vision in which "the image of a cow rose before him, just like the celestial cow which grants all wishes. He milked the cow and was giving the milk to Mangal when the cow turned into a goddess...." (34). Hori died without the satisfaction of owning a cow, which was nothing less than owning the Kamdhenu for him.

The farmers were at the mercy of the Zamindars and the money-lenders who had no mercy for them. The Zamindars would realize not only the rent, but would also impose fine, throw them off their land on a false excuse. The farmers had no escape --between the devil and the deep sea they were: Rai Saheb, the Zamindar, asked Hori to inform the villagers to collect Rs. 500/- for him though it was too big a sum for the villagers. The money-lenders were like vultures. Prem Chand writes to expose their tyranny—"Murderers and blood-suckers, that's what you village headmen are. Interest rates of twenty five and fifty per cent, tips and donations, bribes and graft—rob the poor any way you can!" (22) Police, Patwari and 'the Brahmins also demand a share in the flesh. The Police Inspector has been named Ganda Singh by Prem Chand because he was strong as a

ram to extort money from the farmers. About the oppressive role of different agencies, Prem Chand writes: "Everyone around here considers the farmer fair game. He can hardly stay on in the village if he doesn't pay off the Patwari. If he doesn't satisfy the appetite of the Zamindar's men, life is made impossible for him. The Police Chiefs and the constables act like sons-in-law. Whenever they happen to pass through the village, the farmers are duty bound to entertain them royally and provide gifts and offerings lest they get the whole village arrested by filing a single report. Someone or other is always turning up—the head record keeper or the revenue official or the deputy or the agent of the collector or Commissioner — and the farmer is supposed to attend him on bended knee" (27). Thus, the novelist has drawn attention of the society towards the tyranny that the farmers were subjected to.

But the condition of the Rai Saheb, who was the Zamindar, was no better. He was patriotic and commiserated with his tenants yet he was obliged by the circumstances to impose penalty. He explained, "We seek shelter from revenge with the police, the officials, the judges and the lawyers, and like beautiful women, we become mere playthings in their hands.... When the British Saheb comes here on a tour or a hunt, it's my job to trail along after him. One frown from him and our blood runs cold.... we have fallen prey to the system, a system that's completely destroying us" (17). The novelist has a soft corner for the Zamindar who he thinks is caught in a vicious circle.

But money-lenders have no saving grace. They are incarnations of devil, the off-springs of Mammon who was damned to hell because he loved nothing but gold. Prem Chand exposes their villainy as he tells the society, "I remember your giving us thirty rupees to buy a bullock. Then it becomes a hundred, and now hundred has become two hundred. That's how you people rob the farmers and turn them into hired hands while you take over control of their land."

The Brahmins who act as family priests also look for the opportunity to fleece the gullible farmers. These Brahmins would demand the toll in the name of God and heaven without any qualms of conscience. Prem Chand takes a dig at such Brahmins as he says, "As a family priest, you can go to anyone's door and come back with something in hand. You people get something whenever there's a birth, whenever there's death, whenever there is a marriage, whenever there's funeral. You work the fields. You lend out money. You act as brokers. And if anyone makes a mistake, you set a fine and ransack his place, with all that money, your bellies still aren't full" (59).

The editor Pt. Onkarnath who boasted of being the mentor and champion of the underdog was factually a hypocrite. He charged money from the Rai Saheb for keeping his lapses under carpet and also from the foreign firms to give place to their advertisements in his paper against his sworn policy of swadeshi. He knew he had the power to malign anybody, and was out to use this

power of the press to entrap big cheese for money. Giving him a dressing down Rai Saheb said, "Yes, I admit that on one or two occasions you have shown some manliness, but always with an eye to your own interests, not the public welfare. Now don't start looking shocked and angry. Every campaign you have fought has had the, same opportune results—the enhancement of your own prestige and power and income" (63). And as the Rai Saheb offered to pay the subscription of a hundred new fake subscribers, he accepted the bribe with a smiling face. He said, "The first transaction this morning brought in fifteen hundred rupees." I must have seen an auspicious face when I first woke up."(64)

Chandra Prakash Khanna, Bank Manager and sugar mill Director lived a dissolute life, regardless of the fact that he had made a hell of the life of his wife, Govindi. The novelist tells, "Often he would lash out angrily at Govindi. On such occasions she would retreat to her own room and spend the night weeping while Khanna sat in the living-room listening to the music of prostitutes, or went out drinking to the club" (55). He had cast his evil eyes on Doctor Malti. In business he was an opportunist. He wanted commission from Rai Saheb to get loan sanctioned to him.

Shyam Behari Tankha, lawyer and broker, had his finger in every pie. Money was topmost in his mind and every other consideration was subsidiary. He enticed Rai Saheb to contest election for council by giving him an understanding that the Raja Saheb would hand over a hundred thousand rupees on a platter to get him dropped out of the race, though it was known that the Raja Saheb was determined to get the distinction of defeating the Rai Saheb. Tankha had obviously double-crossed the Rai Saheb for his own interest, and dismissed him arrogantly.

Mirza Khurshed was a man of Persian origin. "He had made two pilgrimages to Mecca—but he drank heavily. He would often say that there was no point in sacrificing life, for the sake of the poor if one, didn't obey any of God's other commandments. His was not a clean past. He was a contractor in Basra but he ran into trouble because he, carried an affair with an English woman. He was ordered to leave the country within twenty-four hours. As he was an old acquaintance, Rai Saheb helped him in setting up a shoe store. He made a fast buck and got elected to the Council on the ground of a good reputation. However, he had no religious scruples. He did not say his prayer for ten years. After some time, he became a pauper and had to borrow money even from Gobar and forgot to repay the loan. But all his strength and weakness remained confined to his personal life, as he had nothing do with the society. In a way he was wasting his life." (32)

The picture of the society presented in *Godaan* is dark and dismal. The farmers were exploited, the money-lenders and business-class, represented by Khanna and Tankha were ruthless in making money and Zamindars, represented by the Rai Saheb as he said, were forced by circumstances to extort money from the farmers. What was the hope for such a society! Was it dead or still pulsating? Such questions seem to have perplexed the novelist. After all, the society is an institution, having innate strength to regenerate. However, degraded a society be, there are

always some elements which sustain it. Professor Mehta and Dr. Malti represent such elements. They had finer emotions of love, service and sacrifice. Mehta was a Professor of Philosophy while Malti was a Physician. Mehta was of the view that concepts of dualism and non-dualism had no significance without practical application of ideas to life, which meant that gulf between different faiths should be bridged. Dr. Malti was actually doing it. She nursed the child of Gobar and would often visit the dwellings of the poor to give treatment to the sick. "Prem Chand puts his faith in the goodness of man. Howsoever bad the times be, saints and prophets come to the world generally when they are most needed by the society" (Interpretation, Inder Nath 56). Thus, the processes of degeneration and regeneration go on simultaneously.

The artist's aim is to present a true picture of the society before the people to make them aware of the evils that have afflicted the society. In this connection Thomas Carlyle holds that an artist is "the world's priest guiding it like a sacred pillar of fire, in its dark-pilgrimage through the waste of time" (Hero as a Poet 44). A. H. Clough also thinks that it is the duty of an artist to give right guidance to the society. In his poem, Come, Poet Come the poet says —

"Come, Poet Come
To give an utterance to the dumb,
And make vain babbles silent, come." (Poems and Prose Remains, Volume II 87)

Hori is that dumb that required the voice of the novelist. Prem Chand's *Godaan* presents a criticism of the society in true colours. In his address to the Progressive Writers' Association also, Prem Chand said, "A litterateur or an artist is by nature, progressive. He does not perceive the individual and society in those conditions of happiness and freedom in which he wants to see them in his imagination. For this reason, he always feels dissatisfied with the present mental and social conditions. He wants to end these disgusting conditions so that the world may become a better place to live and die in." In his struggle to make the world a better place to live in, it becomes necessary for an artist to fight against the evil which have bedeviled the society and establish a world of joy and happiness. *Godaan* is certainly an admirable attempt in this direction.

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