

Plight of Farmers in Select Short Stories of Munshi Premchand

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Abstract

Agriculture is at the core of India socio-economic and socio-cultural way of life. For more than 58% of Indian citizens agriculture is the primary source of livelihood. In recent times India has seen searing transformations in the agricultural sectors. The passing of agricultural reform bills in 2020 by the Indian parliament emulate the strategies of modernizing agricultural sectors by the government. However, such changes has also brought with a dissenting sections of the farmers who fear that these new laws would bind them to the profit making tendencies of large corporate houses. The farmer in India has never been free from exploitation by factions who have control over the agricultural sector. The Indian farmer is often overburdened by loans, with issues of destruction of his produce because of natural calamities like flood and droughts as well as the strong clasp of the middle man in the market. As such the figure of farmer as an marginalized individual becomes worthy of analysis. And literature as a representative space where the prosperity and angst of the society can be articulated becomes a pertinent sphere in analyzing the plight of the farmer. In this paper the plight of the Indian farmer is analysed through select short stories of eminent Indian writer Munshi Premchand. Premchand's fiction is inextricably bound to the plight of the marginalized and dispossessed sections of the society. In his short stories ordinary farmers who constantly negotiate the treacherous waters of a materialistic society is given a potent voice. We as readers are made to confront the rather gory nature of the exploitation that farmers face. The paper therefore would try to understand the plight of the farmer as represented in Premchand's fictions.

Keywords: Farmer, agriculture, society, exploitation.

Introduction

Dhanpat Rai Srivastava (31 July 1880 – 8 October 1936) more popular by his pen name Munshi Premchand was one of the foremost writer of modern Hindi literature. Some of his famous works are *Godaan* (1936), *Gaban* (1931), *Karmabhoomi* (1932) and *Idgah* (1933). As an author Premchand observed the society from close quarters. Adopting a realist stance Premchand critique the exploitative nature of the society and portrayed the plight of the down trodden and marginalized sections of the society. His characters are a victim to the exploitative attitude of the majoritarian sections of the society. Premchand's fictions portray his unease with the state of affairs and a urge to liberate the marginalized from the grasp of darkness, illiteracy and sufferings that they have been sufferings because of years of neglect and exclusion from the mainstream.

As a realist writer, Premchand through his articulations of the plight of the downtrodden and marginalized attempts to give a voice to the plight of the unrepresented sections. His novels and short stories present a rather grim picture of the Indian society while at the same to critiquing the vices that are raging in the society. Premchand's composite narratives often challenge colonial, nationalist and casteist notions of societal functioning and give a voice to the dispossessed. His characters are caught in the casteist mindset of the majoritarian community and often succumb to the emotional and physical trauma that they experience in a society that consider them to be unworthy of universal human values. Premchand's fictions in the recent times where protest by different marginalized sections of the society have been raging the country emerge as a vantage point from where to understand the issues that surround these groups. Farmers too in the context of India appear to be group whose grievances have not been addressed in an adequate manner since the times of independence of the country. In India farmers suffer at the hands of land owning class, the middle man, money lenders as well as the corporate bodies. In India farmers in

large numbers commit suicide because of economic exploitation by money lenders and the inability to address their economic concerns through agricultural activities. Premchand's stories too, in a very moving manner portray the plight of the farmers. The following section address the plight of the farmers as represented in Premchand's fictions.

Premchand and the Plight of the Indian Farmer

Not many writers have addressed the issues of the farmer in more coherent manner than Munshi Premchand. Premchand understood the issues of the Indian farmer in a very profound manner. Premchand immersed himself in the life of the farmers and what he wrote was something new for the Hindi literary world. "He had his hands on the pulse of the farmers. He brought to the fore the hitherto untouched realities of their life – realities which many a great author could never fathom." (Sharma 45). Premchand's farmers as represented in his fictions are not prosperous farmers who own huge tracts of land but are farmers who own small tracts of land and cannot afford to employ labourers to work in their farms. These farmers do not have enough capital to cultivate their lands and often have to borrow money from shylockian money lenders. These money lenders who are known as mahajans in the village jargon charge extensive rates of interests and force the farmers into economic and psychological hardships.

In the story *Poos Ki Raat*, which is set in colonial India, the state of deprivation that the farmers face comes to fore. In the story *Halku*, the central protagonist of the story is a small landowning farmer who has to face problems of indebtedness, crop destruction due to natural calamities and wild animals, constant tradeoff between earning and paying debts. The story is universal in its appeal to the problems of the farmer. In the story *Halku* in a chilly wintry night along with his dog Jabra is guarding his crops from the Nilgai, the wild blue bulls found in north India that destroy crops. *Halku* is economically bankrupt. Guarding his crops in a cold wintry night, he finds himself in a dilemma, he cannot decide whether he should spend three rupees on a blanket which is very essential in the winter season or whether he should repay the debt to the money lender. As the story progresses we see that *Halku* succumbs to the burden of debt, he repays his debt and is left to confront the cold north Indian winter season.

Pos Ki Raat depicts the plight of the Indian farmer. The story aptly exposes the fault lines in the agricultural sector of the country. *Halku* is symbolic of the Indian farmer who is left to fend for himself in face of an extortionist system, natural calamities and unjust market policies.

Another story *Sava Ser Gehun* (1921), articulates the dominance of landlords and upper caste on the farmers belonging to the marginalized sections of the society. In the story, Shankar the central character falls into the traps laid by the upper class. Shankar survives on jowar rotis (Barley flat breads) but borrows *Sava ser Gehun* (less than a kilogram of wheat) from Vipraji Maharaj, a Brahmin so as to serve a priest who had visited him. Vipraji Maharaj, realizing the innocent nature of Shankar, exploits and robs him off his share of grains, and continues to charge him year after year for the little amount of wheat he once borrowed, and even diligently returned. As a result of this 'manufactured' indebtedness mounting over the years, Shankar eventually becomes an agricultural labourer from a farmer, and remains in servitude for 20 years, before succumbing, leaving his son in the clutches of the perpetual trap of poverty and indebtedness.

In his famous novel *Godan* (1936), Premchand stresses the deplorable state of affairs in which Indian agriculture is trapped. Hori an important character in the novel portrays how farmers must borrow money from money lenders at high interest rates ; "In this crop, even after weighing everything in the barn, there were some 300/- loan on him, on which someone used to grow 100/- interest. Lagaan was also left with 25 and on the day of Dussehra, money was also to be made for the omen."(Premchand 39). All the farmers of the village-Hori, Shobha, Heera, Gierdhari's all are drowned in debt.

Premchand's apt depiction of the crisis of the farmers and his endeavour to give a voice to the marginalized farmers bring out the nature of existence of the farmer. In the contemporary times of farmer protests that are raging the country Premchand's novels exposes the fault lines that India as an agricultural country inhabits. There is an urgency in the Premchand's portrayal of the plight of the farmers, a strong protest in words about the colonial policies that surround the agricultural sector in India. There is an immediate need to address the vital grievances that the farmers have. Only that India can emerge as a world leader in terms of economy and social stability.

References

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