

Premchand's Treatment of Plight of Farmers in his Short Stories

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Premchand was a keen observer, photographic narrator and a ruthless commentator. He presented a true and real picture of society that even a small corner of it could not escape from microscopic camera of his eyes. So far as condition of farmers is concerned it has been always miserable from beginning of civilization to till date. Premchand has described his plight that he get no relief either from rulers, money lenders, land lords or from the God.

In his story "The Road to Salvation" and its original title was "Mukti Marg" (Salvation Road) he describes about rural life including farmers, untouchables and minorities. Premchand's narrative starts with the description of the feeling of a farmer when he sees his crop flourishing: "The pride of the peasant takes in seeing his fields flourishing is like the soldier in his red turban, the coquette in her jewels or the doctor in the patients seated before him. Whenever Jhingur looked at his cane field a sort of intoxication came over him." (Rubin19).

Jhingur, the farmer becomes angry and loses his temper and starts beating sheep of the shepherd Buddhu who is a shrewd man. Buddhu in order to take the revenge burns the sugarcane field of Jhingur and other farmers. Premchand was very well aware of vulnerability of the farmer. As the narrator comments:

To take vengeance on a farmer is easier than slicing a banana. Whatever wealth he has is in his fields or barns. The product gets into house only after innumerable afflictions of nature and the gods. And if it happens that a human enemy joins hand in alliance with those afflictions, the poor farmer is apt to be left nowhere. (Rubin 20-21)

Jhingur realizes his mistake. He wants to make peace with Buddhu because "a farmer's prosperity comes precisely from being humble. God doesn't like when a peasant walk with his high head" (Rubin 20-21). Jhingur did not like the idea of going to Buddhu

but others urge him to do so. When he reaches out of village, he sees the fire in the fields and run like a leopard to save the crop but in vain. Jhingur and others know very well that it was none other than Buddhu who has put the crop on fire. Jhingur decides to cultivate an intimacy in order to take the revenge and to bring the Buddhu on the same level as he was prospering day by day. Jhingur starts working in a jute factory in the city.

Jhingur hatches a conspiracy with Harihar, the tanner, for teaching a lesson to Buddhu. Here also Premchand presents a fine piece of human psychology through the plot of Jhingur and Harihar . He tries to reveal the mystery of human nature in these words:

But when a thief finds another thief in distress he helps him. Everybody is united in hating evil so the wicked have to love one another; while everybody praises virtues so the virtuous are jealous of each other. What does a thief get by killing another thief? Contempt! A scholar slanders another scholar and attains glory (Rubin 25).

In this story Premchand again shows that not only the farmers but the people doing other professions dependent on agriculture are also easy prey to trap. Here the real masters are the Brahmans who keep other illiterate peoples under their foot in the name of religion and fear of hell. They decide the plenty for breach of the code of behavior set by them. The narrator exposes the intension of the Brahman.

The Brahman, the divinely also stood to profit from the imposition of penance. Naturally he was not one to neglect an opportunity like this. The outcome was Buddhu was charged with death of a cow, the Brahman had got very incensed about it too and he determined the manner of compensation (Rubin 27)

Buddhu's punishment included three months of begging in streets, after that a pilgrimage of seven holy places, donation of five cows to Brahmans and feeding of 500 Brahmans. Buddhu who was living a prosperous life is ruined while performing the rituals of punishment and finally starts working as a laborer in the city with Jhingur.

The story "The Road to Salvation" not only describes the problems of farmer, their hard life and the vulnerability but also the ways of exploitation by upper castes of the uneducated and naïve villagers in the name of the religion and social customs. Though Buddhu belongs to an untouchable community hence Brahmans and other upper caste cannot eat and drinks the food and water of his house. But the food cooked by the upper caste people in the household of the untouchable becomes pure because the fire purifies

everything. Such kind of ambivalence and dual standards can't be swallowed by Premchand and he exposed it in this short story very well.

Premchand understood it clearly that in such a hierarchal and stratified caste system, only the Brahmins who are on the top can enjoy and flourish at the cost of the others. He also made it clear that economic well being of a person decides the status of a person in the society. Buddha belongs to an untouchable caste but none in the village dare to challenge him because he is a rich man in the village and all have to come to his door for one reason or another. Premchand in his article "The Unfortunate Farmers" wrote:

The profession of eighty percentage of Indian population is agriculture. Many percent of it like carpenters, laborers ironsmiths etc are dependent on it for their livelihood. Whatever income the nation has is due to the hard work of those laborers and farmers. Our schools, educational institutions, police, army, courts and legal institutions all survive on the income of these workers. But the producers of food and cloths strive for filling their bellies, shiver in the cold and die like fly. (Srivastava 73)

"A feast for the Holy Man" is another story showing the miserable condition of Indian farmer. In this story Premchand reveals the dilemma of a farmer family when a holy man (Sadhu) comes to their door for food when they themselves had nothing to eat as the narrator describes: "The crops had been cleaned out of barn, the money lender had taken the half, the landowner's agent's agent had collected the other half, and the chaff had been sold to get the ox-trader of their back and that was all" (Rubin 30).

After dispensing with whatever was there in the house including the flour kept for offering to God the poor family sleeps hungry. The Sadhu enjoys the food offered by the farmer Ramdhan. Ramdhan could not say no to the holy man to go vacant handed. A farmer would like to die before facing such a situation. In the end of the story when the holy man was enjoying a sound sleep in front of his house after having a healthy meal Ramdhan says to himself, "Well he is a better man than I am" (Rubin 32).

The original title of the story "The power of Curse" was "Garib Ki Hay" (The Laments of the poor) and was first time published in 1911. In the story Munshi Ramsevak refuse to return the money of a Brahmin widow who kept her money with him for safety purpose. Nobody in the village came for her help and gradually the widow's mind gave way. Everybody in the village was frightened of her because she used to remain to bare

food and without clothes. Finally Munga, the widow died on the door steps of Munshi. After this, there began the train of event crossing misfortunes for Munshi's family. Munshi's wife Nagin died due do the fear of Munga's ghost. Ramsevak left home to and became a Sadhu and his son Ramgulam went to jail for burning the crop of a landowner where he used to work.

There is a lot of moralizing in the story. Premchand here seems to bring home the point that a man can't remain happy and enjoy on the money snatched or earned through illegal means. Munshi Ramsevak is ostracized not because he is a wicked man but because he is responsible for death of a Brahman. Premchand is critical of villager in no loss terms because they remain silent and inactive. In Premchand's view the person who sees the crime silently is equally culprit with the person who commits it. Premchand also highlights the situation of widows in Indian society where no one comes forward to help them but everyone tries to exploit them economically as well as physically. To so set an example before people, Premchand himself married with a widow.

"January Night" (Original Title of it is "Pus ki Rat") *Pus* is a month in Hindu solar calendar corresponding to the December-January presents an eye opening account of the working conditions of a farmer who workers day and night in all weather even without sufficient cloths and food to save him from devastating and murderous effect of the weather.

In this story when Halku ask his wife Munnii to give the three rupees saved for purchase of a blanket for giving it to the landlord who was at his door. When she refuses to give the money, Halku tries to coax her in order to avoid the insult from the landlord. He makes an excuse that he will figure out another plan for blanket. Munnii draws herself away in anger and her pain comes out in the form of anger in the following words:

You have already tried "Some other plan" You just tell me what plan can be found. Is somebody going to give you a blanket? God knows how many debates are always left over that we can't play off what I say is, give up this tenant farming! The work's killing you, whatever you harvest goes up to pay the arrears, so why not finish with it. Were we born just to keep paying off debts? Earn some money for your own belly; give up this kind of farming. I won't give you the money, I won't! (Rubin 49).

But when Halku retorts, it's fine and I am going to bear the insult; self esteem and reputation is very dear to farmers, the words of Halku charged Munnii like a wild beast.

Handing over the money to her husband Munni said: “Give up farming this time. If you work as a hired laborer you’ll get enough food to eat from it. No one will be yelling insult at you. Fine work, farming someone else’s land! Whatever you earn you throw back into it and get insulted in bargain.” (Rubin 50)

From above analysis it is quite clear and evident that Premchand not only understood the plight of farmers but also felt and realized without which such a heart rendering treatment would have not been possible.

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