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A Handful for a Hand Full: Munshi Premchand's *Godan* and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Randidangazhi*

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Abstract:

Society sets norms and rules which its members have to adhere to. It has also set up mechanisms to deal with the anomalies that may potentially disrupt the system. The paper attempts to vouchsafe the phases as well as the faces of a wretched human being's entity through the novels *Godan* (The Gift of a Cow) by Munshi Premchand and *Randidangazhi* (Two Measures of Rice) by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. The novels can be looked at not as an individual story but a piece of story expounding the extreme sorry state of multitudes of the oppressed and suppressed sections of the society. A comparative exegesis of two novels which represent the two facets of exploitation and feudal hegemony opens an avenue to closely look at the tragic issues of harassment, corruption, subjugation and hypocrisy. In both the novels, there is a clear depiction of the politics and the corruption of the land owners and the feudal lords and the lower sections who were the victims of this system. In an attempt to awaken the conscience of the public to transform the society, both Premchand and Thakazhi depict in their novels an active world of the socio-economic background of Kerala and North India during the thirties and forties so as to bring out the transition in India. They believe that the only solution to the socio-political malaise of India is a social revolution.

Keywords:

Realism, Progressive Movement, Exploitation, Social norms, Revolution.

The selected novelists, as well as the literary stalwarts Munshi Premchand and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, are the champions of progressive literary movement in Hindi and Malayalam literature respectively. Theirs was a single-minded effort to bring forth a new form of fiction for a revaluation of values, especially social values in conformity with the needs of the time and the urges of the people. Marxism helped them to scrutinize the basic structure of their society. Freudian Psychology empowered them to delve deep into the inner chambers of the human psyche. Among the many novelists, they are two of the most outstanding authors of the contemporary Indian literary scene. It is widely acclaimed that they are trendsetters and victors in making the novel a powerful tool for social transformation. The emergence of novel is more or less a social phenomenon than a natural one as a genre of literature. Society enters into history and vice versa with the novel. Their fiction has striking similarities and, in many facets, they are most closely comparable to the 20th-century novelists of India. The empathy of temperament is also similar in their writings. They raised their voice against the human atrocities and depicted the lives of the common folk as the way they are, albeit it lacked the pomp and glory of the high-class society in ivory towers and

skyscrapers. They began writing about common people in common language easily comprehensible to them. Hence, they tried to reflect and refract the real happenings of life using pen as their weapon. As our country envisages 'unity in diversity', it's ordinarily visible in the situations and circumstances in the life of people from northern and southern parts of India. This is lucidly brought out by these writers in their selected novels *Godan* and *Randidangazhi* in the midst of regional nuances, through the depiction of lower castes and their miseries in the evil clutches of the exploiters and feudal landlords.

Munshi Premchand, 'the emperor of the novelists' (upanyas samrat) lived in a period that witnessed many tremendous changes in Indian society that had an impact in the formation of his character and personality. The socio-political events like the foundation of Arya Samaj and personalities like Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi influenced the making of his intellectual and emotional standards. After his mother's bereavement, life seemed so hard to him. His own bitter experiences, widowhood of his stepmother, his own unhappy marriage made him a staunch believer and follower of Arya Samaj. He had been groping in the dark to find his inner queries and Arya Samaj rendered him relief. Swadeshi movement and the revolutionary terrorist movement as well had an abiding influence on him. What made him attracted to Gandhiji was his treatment of the poor and his focus on the peasantry. He pointed out that the writer's quest through his writings is to end the oppressive social condition so that the world becomes a better place to live. He holds the notion that a writer could bring enlightenment in the society and he could do it by depicting the society truthfully. A novelist according to him portrays his age faithfully. Balzac of France, George Eliot of England and Dean Howells of America materialized the art of realism in writing as a reaction against romanticism. Munshi Premchand is the first Hindi author to introduce realism in his works. He believed that words must not be forced out of the character's mouth but must be spoken naturally. His themes comprise agrarian life, corruption, child widowhood, the feudal system, colonization, exploitation of women and peasants, issues related to industrialization, interpersonal relationships and political scenario of the times. Born out of the socio-political realities of his time and his personal odyssey to seek an explanation for human predicament, Premchand's fiction astutely maps the contemporary cultural dimensions of North India. The novel *Godan*, written in the form of a simple parable depicts the change in social order through a complexity of emotions and feelings.

Godan foregrounds the struggle between the peasant and the money-lender backed by various forces. It depicts an agricultural community with its hard work and simple pleasures, its exploitations and misery, its frustrations and hopes. Premchand's artistry and realism are at their best in the creation of some of the central characters, particularly that of Hori, who emerges as an immortal symbol of the Indian peasantry. Hori who in his lifetime could never fulfil his dream of owning a cow is insisted to donate a cow to

attain salvation. The system that exploited him throughout his life does not even spare him in death. Hori can be taken as a symbol of Premchand's own life. His nemesis is the fate of the ordinary farmer who is exploited to the marrow by the zamindars and moneylenders during the pre-Independence period. Though Premchand had a tendency toward idealization, this novel is realistic, controlled in form and disillusioned in spirit. The novel instils a penetrating and moving insight into the deep and insoluble crisis of the small peasant producer within the colonial framework.

Premchand lays bare the misery which is a permanent fixture in the lives of people who belong to the different ends of the social spectrum. A study of the novel reveals the vein of corruption, manipulation and hypocrisy that lies hidden under pseudo-idealism. It lays bare the victimization of individuals at the hands of the representatives of powerful, oppressive social institutions. It also shows the peripheral situation of women caught in the traps of poverty, feminine ideals and humiliating social practices. Moreover, the novel also shows those who are victims of self-inflicted violence, mainly due to their submission to social malpractices. In fact, the narrative offers a vivid glimpse of the multi-faceted violence that is part of the lives of people residing in the villages and small towns of India. *Godan* for the first time in Hindi literature realistically depicts the shift of power taking place in the Indian society: the feudal structure crumbling and the capitalism taking over. It suggests that the change of the society from the feudalistic to capitalistic did not change anything for the poor exploited farmers, farm labourers or the labourers working in the industries. The exploiters changed but the fate of the exploiters remained the same. It is the story of Hori, a peasant cultivating five bighas of land and perennially oscillating between kisan and major status on account of unbearable burdens of rent, interest, taxes etc. Hori's solitary ambition is to possess a small plot of land and a cow and he makes all the compromises necessary to realize his 'Small Peasant Utopia'. But his Utopia remains unrealized; nay it is shattered by the brute forces of a colonial system and a class society. Premchand is no longer satisfied with the focus on the 'enemy outside' the village—the absentee landlord, the trader, the lawyer and the government official invading the village like locusts from time to time.

Godan contains numerous tales having independent existence battered into one and it becomes tough to identify the main from the rest. It embodies the various classes present in the Indian society from the farmer, labourer, zamindar, capitalist, urban and rural along with their issues and concerns. The death of Hori symbolizes the 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 livelihood is also symbolic of the inherent vulnerability of the small producers, of the ultimate fate of villagism and peasantism and of the ultimate triumph of the cash nexus over the old society. The death of the peasant of the old type is, in other words, symbolic of the death of the old society which could not be reformed from within. The novel also introduces the stimulation among the masses and suggesting revolution to be imminent. Thus, it is not possible to organize the plot similar to the manner of the works having only one main plot and limited sub-plots. Premchand has

given a praiseworthy attempt to strike an appropriate balance and connection between many cardinal issues and challenges of Indian society through his *Godan*.

Hori, the protagonist of *Godan* is an inveterate simpleton, God-fearing and tradition-loving fanner who cannot think of overstepping customary ethics and morals. He becomes an easy prey to the despotism and enslavement, injustice and exploitation of the hard-hearted landlords as well as money-lenders. The novel personifies the catastrophic finale of the path of compromise and submission as depicted in the last outburst of Hori in the following words:

Hori could not utter even a single word. He felt as if he was sinking deep in the bottomless pit of unbearable humiliation. Today after fighting tenaciously for thirty years for life, he felt totally defeated and crushed. He felt he had been made to stand on the gate of the town and whoever passed that way spat on his face. He felt as if he was screaming aloud saying: "Brothers! Have pity on me. I did not care for the scorching sun of Jeth nor for the heavy showers of Magh. If you pierce this body—you will find it injured beyond repair and crushed and debilitated. Ask it whether it has a moment's rest.' On top of it then this humiliation. Oh! you are still alive, O coward, O wretched being"! Hori's faith which having become deep had rendered him blind and blunted his sensibilities for all these years had been shattered today and destroyed forever. (*Godan*, 295)

Hori is aware of the fact that he has been wronged and exploited, yet the fear and respect for conventions and customs hamper his movement towards modernity and change. The concept of Hori and Gobar are inversely proportional to each other. He realizes that his father is incorrigible and his sense of *dharmā* will never allow him to raise his voice against inhumanity and exploitation. He shows that blind belief in destiny will only increase misery and problems. A new orientation has to be given to age-old traditions, if not total rejection. If Hori is meek, docile and tradition-loving, Gobar is his father's anti-thesis. "Hori's son, Gobar, represents the younger generation. He does not like his father, who pays all the taxes due from him, kowtowing to the Rai Saheb. God, he says, has made all of us equal. Hori, however, differs. He believes that all those who are born poor could not have earned good by their actions in their previous life, while those born rich must have". (Gopal, 429)

Premchand drew attention towards the dejected plight of the poor peasants and tenants. His aim was not only to depict the unbearable condition of the lower section peasants, but also to highlight the disparity between the poor and the powerful, and the apathy or rather the antipathy of the haves against have-nots. The rich moneylenders were not only blind to the abject condition, in which the poor peasants were living but also took the opportunity to rob them even of the last morsel of the bread. The poor peasants were

poverty-stricken, yet they were exploited by the landlords and the money-lenders, whose poverty was manmade.

In *Godan*, every character rambles for existence and individual freedom. Every individual has his own social limitations to restrict his freedom of choice. It gives the message that socialism is the only hope for Indian society since it concerns a classless society, free from social prejudices. The first step towards socialism is to bridge the gulf between the rich and the poor. Premchand has very effectively represented the absurdities of life of the various sections of society. In *Godan*, we find both static developing characters. His existence is defeated by death but he is not defeated by the harsh and hard realities of life. Thus, Hori's character is an embodiment of the suffering at the brutal hands of present society with all its shallow ideals and hypocrisies. With a view to heighten and deepen the tragedy of Hori, we sympathize with the pains, sufferings and helplessness and close the novel with a grave heart. K.D. Kurtkoti's words exemplify the grandeur of *Godan*.

Premchand's *Godan* was published in 1936 and the impact of that last masterpiece of the author on the reading public was enormous. He led the movement of progressive literature and was recognized as the leader of that movement even by writers belonging to languages other than Hindi. Now, four decades after the publication of *Godan* it is possible for us to assess and evaluate this work with a dispassionate mind. I am not quite conversant with the reactions of critics when the novel was published. But one can imagine the powerful appeal of the central character Hori, the significance of which is archetypal. Hori has the completeness of the characters in our epics, a completeness characterized by a natural piety and simplicity. What is meant by completeness here is the character's capacity to sustain all the experiences that are possible in the span of its lifetime, and also its capacity to transcend all such experiences. (Kurtkoti, 137)

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, 'the chronicler of Kuttanad' is widely recognized as the writer who gave voice to the peasant life of Travancore. He was influenced by the Marxian ideology and Freudian theory and actively participated in the Writer's Movement and the literary circle led by Kesari Balakrishnapillai. He entered into the Malayalam literary field shocking the refined attitude of the elite class. He announced to the outer world of India that there exists such a language known as Malayalam and its literature. Along with him, P.Keshava Dev, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, S.K.Pottekkat and P.C.Kuttikrishnan constituted the pentagon that created the mighty verbal edifice which is known as the Renaissance novel in Malayalam. Like William Faulkner's "Yoknapatawpha" or R.K.Narayan's "Malgudi", Kuttanad is the locale of Thakazhi and thirty six of his novels are centered on Kuttanad and its contingency. Being a member of agrarian family, it aroused his spirit to know the life of farmers and depict as it is in raw form with flesh and blood characters. He belongs to the Thakazhi village of Kuttanad Thaluk and his domain is the complex world comprising the

miseries and hardships of the coolie workers, scavengers, and middle-class multitudes of the region of Kuttanad. It is an amazing geographical region on the banks of river Pamba manifesting the natural beauty of Kerala. Known by the sobriquet "rice granary of Kerala", the lives of people hailing from Kuttanad is vested in the farmlands and paddy fields. Right from the regime of Kings and landlords, it remained as a thing apart from all other regions of Kerala even in its social relationships. "Pariahs" and "Pulayas", the low castes by birth constitute the majority of Kuttanad. They were literally the slaves of Janmis (landlords). The farmers found delight in their strenuous toil in the field by singing Nadanpattu, Krishipattu and they made their occasions festive and indefatigable. The Progressive Literature Movement that gathered new momentum in the North under the leadership of Munshi Premchand and Harindranath Chattopadhyay exercised its sway on the Kerala writers infused with revolutionary zeal. They were provided the intellectual leadership they need by two scholar-critics Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and M.P. Paul. Like Premchand, Thakazhi brought realism to Malayalam fiction in his own way and championed the cause of the insulted and humiliated segment of a specific regional community with profound sympathy. He saw the scary sides of life and portrayed them widely. Although realism lacked the pomp and hubbubs of the elite strata of society and ivory towers, he exhibited his presence as an artist who is in love with the poor and who hates those who exploit them. His major themes in novels consist of caste segregation, feudal and bureaucratic system, and connection with Hinduism, exploitation of women and lower castes, man-woman relationship and political temper of the times. The novel *Randidangazhi* depicts the struggles and exploitation of poor and middle-class peasants in the hands of the avaricious landlords. This socio-political fiction faithfully records the transformation taken place in the social milieu and awakens those dormant forces and makes them aware of their inherent power in them to change their living conditions. Dr Ayyappa Panicker has rightly reviewed *Randidangazhi* thus:

Alleppey is on the borders of Kuttanad; the location of *Randidangazhi* is the heart of Kuttanad. It is the Thakazhi country proper. Here among the water-locked rice fields and little islets of coconut gardens live the pulayas and pariahs who work there and their masters, mostly upper castes Hindus and latterly Christians who virtually treat them as bonded slaves and own all the lands. These workers are among the poorest of the poor, hardly better than beggars, for the beggars have the freedom to starve without any freedom. Victims of their own delusions, the illiterate and superstitious pulayas and pariahs have for long been subjected to inhuman treatment at the hands of their masters. They are used to putting the blame for their sufferings on themselves or their past lives rather than on their masters or the social system. They are quite acclimatized to a fatalistic attitude of resignation to whatever might happen to them. (Panicker, 90)

Randidangazhi begins with the triangular relationship between Chirutha, the daughter of Kali Parayan and Kunjali, and the two young and sturdy men, Koran and Chathan, who wish to possess her by wedlock. As Kali Parayan was demanding a higher *penpanam* (bride price) for her appealing daughter, many of her suitors had to leave in sheer disappointment. Albeit Chathan could not meet the adamant demands of Kali Parayan, the more enterprising Koran bound himself to the service of the big landowner Pushpavelil Ouseph and acquired the required amount as an advance for future services and married Chirutha. He was put in charge of a one hundred-acre rice field owned by Ouseph. The land responded gaily to his hard work, and the crop in his field proved to be the best in the whole locality. He was proud of being a good farm worker and expected to continue in the service of his master Ouseph as his permanent employee. But at the time of the harvest, he had the prime surprise of his life when Ouseph treated him on a par with the hired labourers and disposed of him with meagre wages. He got only a minor fraction of what he thought was his due. The workers are not supposed to ask for any explanation and they have no right to question the landowners. The whole system and the institutions like government supported the powerful landowners and the monstrous ingratitude towards the powerless workers, who imbibes the resistance power to question the exploitation of the feudal lords and he emerges as a revolutionary leader but he was imprisoned for killing the landlord's son who attempted to molest his wife Chirutha. Still, he goes with optimism and revolutionary spirit. His determination is portrayed even in the beginning of the novel when he decides to marry Chirutha. He shows the dignity of strenuous physical labour and succeeds in his attempt to create an awareness among his fellow-beings about the futility of dedicated service to landlords and the inequality and exploitation they suffered. His friend Chathan too is a powerful character and through him, Thakazhi presents the moral virtues upheld by the illiterate, innocent peasant-folk. Though Chathan loved and desired to marry Chirutha and failed in his attempt, he takes up the task of protecting her and her child, when Koran tells him and treats her as his own sister.

All the peasants suffer from utter poverty and the landlords have become greedier and more selfish. Most of the farmers have been reduced to landless labourers. The landlords are quite unconcerned about the starvation of their serfs, the big landlords pay the wages in money against the traditional practice of paying it in the grain. They sell the hoarded grain in the black market making a great profit. Koran, who has produced a bumper harvest for his Thambran (landlord) by toiling day and night, in filth and mud, and who feels proud of being a loyal and efficient farm worker, is without grain. When his serfs in utter starvation plead with Auseph Mapillah to pay their wages in grain, Auseph Mapillah throws a rupee each at them and declares with all his usual ruthlessness: "Take it if you want. There is neither rice nor paddy here for you. If you don't want to work, pay up the advances and clear out". (*Randidangazhi*, 80)

The pitiable plight of the poor and middle-class peasants is well captured in the novel. The fate of the poor farmers of the middle class is not better; they too are the victims of feudalism and capitalism. The inhuman situation is summed up in the following words of Matthew to his neighbour Mathu: One takes two acres of paddy field on lease at a very high rent; farming is started on borrowed capital. The landlords and the creditors come and take away the grain. Even then the rent is in arrears. All the toil is for nothing. When the debt accumulates, they acquire the two cents of land on which one may have a roof to live under. That is the way we are all ruined. (*Randidangazhi*, 49)

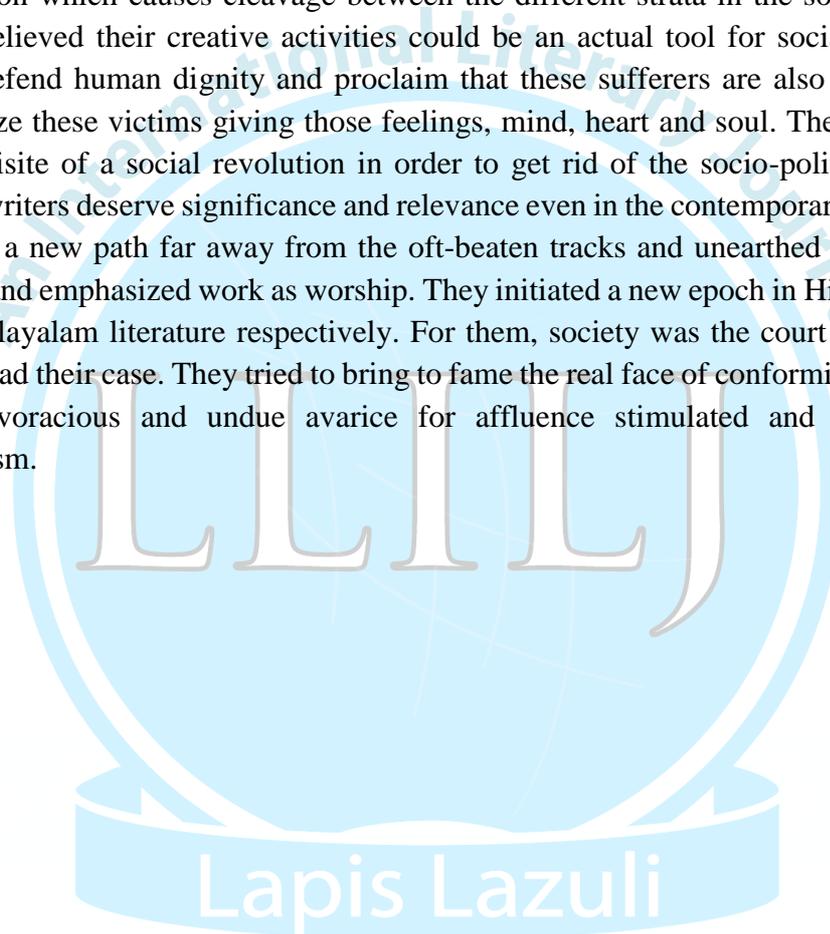
Koran is transformed into a socialist revolutionary though he comes from a low social status. He grows from an unsophisticated, loyal and efficient farm worker to a dedicated activist of the workers' union under the influences of his own experiences and of the outer circumstances. Pillai here suggests that the rise of class-consciousness and political awareness in Koran and other workers is not out of any doctrinaire education. On the other hand, it is the natural outcome of the lessons learnt from their own experiences. Pillai brings out the transformation: Who taught him all this? It was an amazing phenomenon. It came spontaneously, naturally. The elephant realized its own strength — the Paraya discovered his own position. He became articulate; he had a cause and his cause had a sound basis. Is there not such a thing as the experience of centuries? Is not philosophy itself the spontaneous blossoming of human experience? (*Randidangazhi*, 92). When Koran was released from prison, he was glad to be reunited with Chirutha, his son Velutha and his friend Chathan. His sufferings were never futile for the new generation of workers could now shout with the strong belief the new slogans: Long Live Revolution, Long Live Union and Land to the Tillers.

The names of the heroes also bear some striking resemblance apart from their delineation of sagas. Koran and Hori are the victims of exploitation of the have-nots by the haves. The unequivocal gap between the labourers and working classes are overtly depicted in both the novels through the mouthpiece of Hori and Koran. *Godan* is an elegy of married life. Hori and Dhaniya were not romantic lovers, but Hori had intense admiration for Dhaniya's silent sacrifices she has made for the family. She was praised by Hori as 'she had to go to bed hungry herself, but she had to make tea and snacks for the other women'. They have admiration for each other, but its form has changed. Towards the end of the novel, Hori gazes at Dhaniya and tears roll down from the corners of his eyes. He asks for Dhaniya's forgiveness as his swan song. "Forgive me, Dhaniya, if I've wronged you in any way. I am ready to depart. I have no cow. Don't weep, Dhaniya. The worst is over. Let me die." (*Godan*, 338). Koran becomes increasingly conscious of the need to free himself from his personal or family life and devote his life to the service of the working class. Koran feels guilty of neglecting his wife: "I shouldn't have married you, because you are a problem for me. I always feel that I am neglecting the girl I have married. I am not destined to enjoy the bliss of family

life” (*Randidangazhi*, 96). Hori’s wife Dhaniya and Koran’s wife Chirutha are the sanguine embodiments of powerful women characters. Chirutha not only supports Koran to fight for the needs of the labourers but motivates other women also to join the part of the ensuing struggles. Hori’s Dhaniya fulfils his wish to her best.

Dhaniya rose like a machine, went in and brought out twenty annas which she had earned from the sale of yarn. Placing the coins in the icy palm of her husband, she looked at Datadin. “Maharaj, 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 the cow. And she collapsed and sank to the ground. (Premchand, 339)

Both Thakazhi and Munshi Premchand nursed unabashed hatred for the social institution which causes cleavage between the different strata in the social structure. They believed their creative activities could be an actual tool for social renovation. They defend human dignity and proclaim that these sufferers are also human. They humanize these victims giving those feelings, mind, heart and soul. They insisted the prerequisite of a social revolution in order to get rid of the socio-political disorder. These writers deserve significance and relevance even in the contemporary days as they flagged a new path far away from the oft-beaten tracks and unearthed the dignity of labour and emphasized work as worship. They initiated a new epoch in Hindi Literature and Malayalam literature respectively. For them, society was the court of law where they plead their case. They tried to bring to fame the real face of conformist democracy, man’s voracious and undue avarice for affluence stimulated and promoted by capitalism.



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