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## **Premchand's *Godan*: Plight of A Marginalized Peasant**

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### **Abstract:**

Premchand's *Godan* (The Gift of a Cow) is considered his masterpiece of peasant India. This novel is the backbone of Indian society in which peasants were suffering but still never stopped being hopeful and optimistic. It is the epic of rural atmosphere and considered equivalent to rural 'Gita'. The novel highlights the miserable life of poor peasants in pre-colonial period and it is the story of unending suffering and exploitation of farmers by moneylenders and it is a live depiction of landowners as to how they pushed poor peasants to live in margins of society. The main characters of *Godan* are suffering from illness, starvation, misery, illiteracy, exploitation and death.

The leading character Hori around whom the whole story revolves is a poor subaltern who experiences the sufferings and hardships of life. The main theme of this novel is exploitation of peasants by upper class people or by money lenders. They took advantage of illiteracy of poor people, moneylenders considered themselves to be owner of the peasants once a loan is given. It was mainly because of the interest rates which were unimaginably high and unfair. Therefore, they never got rid of the debt. The poor Hori's unfulfilled desire to keep a cow at home, the importance of a cow and why it is considered necessary in Hindu religion to gift of a cow at the time of death are some of the most important parts of this novel. This paper specially highlights the plight of peasants.

**Keywords: Exploitation, Illiteracy and Starvation.**

*Godan* was first published in 1936 in Hindi and it was first translated in English by Jai Ratan and P. Lal in 1957. Due to its popularity the director Trilok Jetley made a movie "Godan" in 1963 starring Rajkumar, Mehmood and Shashikala. In 2004, *Godan* was also part of 26-episode TV series named *Tehreer*. It shows the caste discrimination, class distinction, miserable life of farmers, lack of unity between peasants and condition of women in society. Hori is the

main character of the novel. His wife was Dhania and they had three children's named as Gobar, Sona and Rupa. Heera and Shubha were Hori's brothers. Hori was a poor peasant but fully dedicated towards moral values and religious beliefs. Although he had five-acre land but due to debt he was forced to do work in his own fields as a labourer and was exploited by Moneylenders, Police, Pandit, Patwari and Mahajan.

One of the characters of the novel Zamindar Sahab, played the role of a bridge between rural and urban life. Hori was dedicated towards Zamindar Sahab and never forgot to pay his regards to him any day. According to Hori it is the only reason of his safety:

It is the result of this meeting and intimacy that I am safe till now. Otherwise, no one could know what had happened to us. There are so many people in the village but there are only few who had not been dislodged and whose property had not been attached. When I am under debt, it is good for me to please the master in every possible way. (9)

Once on his way to Rai Sahab's house he met Bhola herding his cows. Bhola was a shepherd of their neighbour village and traded milk and butter. Hori always had a strong desire of having a cow in the family as per the religious values of the Hindu religion. Hori knew it very well that Bhola's wife had died and he was searching for a bride for himself. Utilising this fact as a mode of persuasion, Hori assured him to search a good woman for him. Bhola was very happy after hearing this and decided to sold a cow in eighty rupees to Hori and gave him two years to pay his money. Hori in return promised him to give some straw for his cows. Gobar (Hori's son) delivered straw at Bhola's house and came in contact with Bhola's widow daughter Jhunia. Gobar returned to his home with cow and love for Jhunia. Having a cow in his courtyard was a moment of pride for Hori because he had succeeded in fulfilling his only desire. The cow however did not survive long and the happiness perished as Hori's brother Heera poisoned the cow out of jealousy. Heera believed that Hori must have hidden some money at the time of spilling up of property among brothers.

Hori's unending sufferings again arose before him because the cow was killed before repaying of loan. To investigate the matter Inspector came alongwith the priest Datadin and imposed a heavy fine on Hori for committing a "cow murder". Out of his misfortune, Hori again had to take a loan and bribe the inspector to save his false prestige and his brother Heera even after knowing that he was the killer. The debt kept on piling up day by day. Out of shame, Heera left the village and unfortunately the responsibility of his family also came on Hori's

shoulders. Harshida R. Chauhan comments upon the exploitation of the lower class in the paper titled “*Godan: A Criticism of Novel by Premchand*”:

Premchand has drawn a realistic picture of the poor peasants exploited by the village Zamindars and the greedy money lenders. The Zamindars collected the revenue and imposed time. Here Rai Sahab fined Hori for the death of a cow, though he did not kill it. The peasants are unable to pay debts, in time and it gets multiplied with the passage of time. They are caught in a debt troop and suffer like Hori until their end. (22)

Hori was very poor and under debt. “The blanket was older than he was. In his childhood he slept under the same blanket with his father. In his youth, he shared the blanket with his son Gobar who slept by his side. And it was yet the companion of old age (129)”. The abject penury of his life was reflected by these words. Radhe Shyam and Bir Pal Singh aptly remark in their paper titled “*Godan: A Story of Struggle for a living by Munshi Premchand*” under Online International Journal of Medical and Social Sciences: “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 as well can be taken as a symbol of Premchand’s own life. (221)”

Another trouble waiting for Hori was when Bhola’s daughter Jhuniah got pregnant with Gobar's child. Gobar left Jhuniah near his home and ran away from the village in dark of the night to save himself from the disgrace. Hori was very kind hearted so he gave shelter to Jhuniah although he knew it is another economic and psychological blow on his family. As expected, all villagers gathered in Hori’s house and forced him not to provide shelter to Jhuniah. Upon which Dhania answered: “...when the rich commit a mistake, nobody raises any objection, their prestige remain untarnished. If the poor commits the same mistake, they lose face. They are defamed. Why these two different moral codes for the rich and the poor? The rich may say that their prestige is more important than the destruction of an innocent life, I don’t care for such prestige. (136)” Post Dhania's outburst, Panch (members of jury) of the village announced of hundred rupees penalty in cash and thirty mounds of grain upon Hori. This shows that the powerful and rich people never missed an opportunity to exploit the poor peasants.

All these rules were only applicable to the poor people and the Dharma also changed in the case of rich. One example of this was that everybody knew about the wanton love and illicit relationship between priest Datadin’s son Matadin and a cobbler girl Selia. However, all the Panchas remained silent and ignored it because Matadin was rich and son of one of the powerful

persons of village. "He made a mark of sandal paste on his forehead, recited religious book, read the Geeta, scrupulously observed religious rites but his prestige was not the least tarnished because he took a dip into the Ganges to wash away his sins. (136)"

The responsibility of Jhunia and Punia (Heera's wife) were naturally shifted upon Hori after the elopement of Gobar and Heera. Hori was already in debt and it was hard for him to get food for his family but he was always determined to face another struggle. He never gave up before the hardships and challenges encountered on his way. Harshida R. Chauhan expresses his views upon the condition of Hori in the paper titled "*Godan: A Criticism of Novel by Premchand*":

He is caught between feeding the family with his meagre earnings and trying to pay off the numerous debts leveled on him by corrupt officials. In fact, indebtedness is shown to be the primary socio-economic factor behind the victimization of the peasants and their families Premchand discloses that the peasant is at the mercy of not one but several persons who never lose an opportunity to divest the poor man of all he has, several persons lead such parasitic existence on the peasants. (18)

The symbolic violence is shown in *Godan* at the time of giving Dowry and the act of Godan (the gift of a cow). His condition became worst at the time of his elder daughter Sona's marriage because Gobar, his last hope left them and moved to the city Lucknow with his wife and son. The harsh words of Gobar completely broke Hori's heart as Gobar said:

What did you spend on bringing me up? You nursed me when I was a baby and after that you let me wander like an orphan. I ate what others ate. I was not fed on milk and butter. Now you want me to clear up your debt, to pay your land revenue and get your daughters married. It means, my existence has no meaning apart from paying your debts and meeting your expenses. I have my own family to look after? (45)

The glass house of their fantasy was broken after hearing it. Later one fine day, Gobar came back from Lucknow and they thought their hard days were passed but there was no end of their penury.

Sona was very beautiful and perfect in all house chores so it was not so tough for Hori to fix her marriage. They succeeded in searching a suitable groom for their daughter but it came

with a heavy amount of dowry. Sona knew the financial condition of her parents so she sent Selia (Cobbler's daughter who was taken in by Hori's family) to her in-law's home to talk to her fiancé about the poor condition of Sona's family and to inform him that Sona is ready for marriage only if they did not take any dowry. Sona's in-laws were finally ready for marriage without taking any dowry but Dhania declined this offer because she thought "money comes and goes but prestige lasts" (286). They again took loan from Dulari (money lender) at double interest rate to save their false social prestige.

However, at the time of their second daughter's marriage their economic condition was very poor. They became labourer in their own fields. One day Datadin came to Hori with a marriage proposal for Rupa (Hori's second daughter) with a widower Ram Sewak. Ram Sewak was only a few years junior to Hori and it was a shame for Hori to marry her daughter with this old man but his poor condition allowed it. Hori gave Datadin a dubious reply:

...life and death depend on destiny. Sometimes old men out live young men. If it was in Rupa's destiny, to have a happy life, she would have it either she was married to a young man or an old man. But if she was destined to suffer, she would suffer. And there was no question of selling the girl. Whatever money he would take from the prospective bridegroom, he would treat it as a loan and pay back every single pice of it due to course of time. He would have liked her to marry to a young man of a respectable – if he had means... (379)

These lines show the pain of a father who had to compromise with his daughter's life due to his condition. The marriage was fixed and they invited Gobar and Sona for attending the wedding of their sister. Hori again took a loan of two hundred rupees from Datadin but Hori did not utter a single word because of shame. Hori thought about his defeated position: "My life has been a long tale of woe, struggle and humiliation. I have worked in the summer heat, in the winter rains. Tear out my heart – see if I am left with any life. I have been utterly exploited. I am an oppressed man..." (385). This was first time when Hori lost his confidence.

After marriage Gobar returned to Lucknow but Jhunia and Mangal (their son) stayed in village for some more days. Rupa was very happy in her husband's home but she knew about the poor condition of his father. She wanted to see her parents happy and better knew about the unfulfilled desire of his father to have a cow in his courtyard because I'm those times it was the matter of social prestige. She discussed this with her husband and decided to send a cow to his

father's house for Mangal but Hori decided to work hard and pay back the money of this cow to Ram Sewak.

Hori got a job in road construction at eight anna per day. Dhania and Hori worked hard to pay off their debts but it was the time of hot summer. One day Hori suffered a heat stroke because of the heat wave and fell unconscious in the field. Somebody informed Dhania about it and when Dhania reached, Hori was busy in recollecting his past memories and told Dhania, "Good, you have come Gobar. I've bought a cow for Mangal. There . . . there it is. Do you see her" (391)? After hearing this Dhania recognized that his last time has come.

Dhania helped Hori to regain his consciousness and Hori saw her and said: "Forgive me Dhania, if I've wronged you in any way. I'm ready to depart. My desire of buying a cow was not fulfilled. Now you would spend the money on my funeral...I have suffered the worst. Now let me die in peace (391)". Every villager reached Hori's house after hearing the bad news of Hori illness and advised Dhania to give a cow in charity. It was a mock on society because they forced Dhania for it although they knew very well that she had no money even to consult a doctor so how will she donate the cow. It was believed in society that when someone gifted a cow to Pandit then the Pandit will pray for the recovery of ill person. Dhania put twenty annas on the hand of her husband and addressed Datadin, "Maharaj there is neither a cow, nor a calf nor any money in the house. This is all the money, I have; this all I can give you. Take this in place of a cow" (392).

This is the sad end of the story. Hori died with his unfulfilled desire to have a cow and spent his whole life under debt. Premchand has beautifully described the realistic picture of the exploitation of lower class by upper class in India. The main character Hori's life is the realistic picture of penury, struggle of individual and tragedy of a peasant. Hori's blind faith upon fate is another reason of his sufferings. He accepts all orders of Panchas and considered them the voice of God.

Premchand here presented a peasant who never leave his dharma or never raise any questions towards upper class. This novel was a masterpiece of that time because he described one of the major problems which was the condition of peasants and how the peasants were crushed by powerful forces, both social and economic.

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