

Peasants in Fiction:
A Study of Select Indian Novels of the 1930s and
40s

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Department of English
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of
Master of Philosophy

December

2016



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I, **Vaidyanath Nishant**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or, to the best of my knowledge, to anybody else and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institute.

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This is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature.

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“Peasants in Fiction:

A Study of Select Indian Novels of the 1930s and 40s”

Submitted by **Vaidyanath Nishant** under the supervision of Dr. Ram Bhawan Yadav of the Department of English, School of Languages and Literature, Sikkim University.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “Peasants in Fiction: A Study of Select Indian Novels of the 1930s and 40s” submitted to Sikkim University for fulfilment of the requirement of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** in the **Department of English**, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Vaidyanath Nishant** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any other Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

We recommend this thesis to be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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“And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength.”

*(Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*)*

To the peasants, who strive, struggle and suffer...

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Dr. Ram Bhawan Yadav, at the outset for guiding and supporting me through the writing of this thesis. His support came along with long debates and complete trust in me by allowing me to learn and explore, which I believe is the core essence of research.

I thank Jayita mam, for her constant support and defending me at times during the research and the other teachers of the Department for their guidance through my Masters.

I take this time and space not to thank, but show my indebtedness to my parents, E. K. Santha and V. Krishna Ananth for helping me grow up to this person with a perspective that allowed me to choose and work on such a topic. They put up with all my confusions and allowed me to outgrow it, learned and continue to learn. We had long discussions and debates for hours where I believe I managed to convince my father on a few arguments regarding the Marxist historiography. I also thank you dad, for the first book you pushed me to read Albert Camus' *The Outsider*, made me think, experience existentialism and continue to do so.

Next, I would like to thank my friend and an elder brother, Maanvender Singh for listening to what I had to say patiently for hours and correcting me where it was required. We did our research together, reading books together and having endless debates. I would also like to thank Deepmoni Gogoi and Ugen Bhutia for giving me time to discuss Marx, Gramsci and Althusser. Thank you Ugen *da* for introducing me to 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed'. Long walks with Deep *da* gave me time to discuss my readings alongside his. Samten Bhutia for being the perfect sister in understanding my work pressure and being of support all the time and the occasional coffee-breaks she used to treat me to.

My friends Wongyal and Mukesh who would wait on me for hours as I sat typing the thesis so that we could take a walk or have a cup of tea together. The small breaks with them gave me time to refresh myself during the heights of this work.

The 2015-16 batch of M. A. History students for accepting me as one of their own and welcoming me into their family.

Vibha *chechi* and Jiby *chettan*, my well-wishers, for providing me with materials I required, from anywhere. Especially Jiby *chettan*, for he got me Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle*, which at one point seemed an impossible task. I also thank Sheetanshu *bhaiya*, for reading my work and giving me important suggestions.

Selvyn uncle for giving the keys of his apartment during my stay in Kolkata during my fieldwork and taking complete care of me even in his absence.

The Central Library staff, especially Rinku *di* for hunting down the books I required from the huge shelves, patiently. And others too (Pinki *di*, Pawan *da*, Kumar *da* and the Security Guards), who helped with endless number of blank papers and even other stationery at times.

Dorjee *da* of M/s Gloria Galleria for putting this into shape and making the words I typed into a beautiful bound volume.

I thank Chakku *akka*, Rajesh sir and Siva sir at Ellen Sharma Memorial Matriculation Higher Secondary School. The three years I spent there made me what I am today.

I also thank Bodh sir and Sucheta mam, who in the initial stages of my research encouraged and gave me clarity.

I thank Menon uncle and Mini aunty for being my second parents and always being my pillars of strength.

I also thank the taxi driver uncle I met in Kolkata, who happened to be from Punjab. During the one hour drive, I got exposed to the realities of the commercialization of agriculture, the Sikh resistance to the British, and the effects of Green Revolution that led him to leave his fields and become a taxi driver in another city.

Above all I owe this research to my teacher, Natraj sir, who has played and still continues to shape my thoughts. He introduced me to the world of Indian English literature. And also Viji mam, who taught me that poetry, was the best form of art and much more at Central University of Karnataka during my graduation days.

Vaidyanath Nishant

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INTRODUCTION

A Historical Background

“Peasants have always borne the brunt of extreme forces of subordination and oppression in the society, first by member of the lower strata of the social and economic hierarchy, then by occupying an underdog position in the political arrangement of society.”¹

The peasant in the present social structure is a product of the modern society; a class that was born after the introduction of private property. It may be stressed here that the peasant as a category is different from the ‘serf’ and the ‘farmer’.² In the past, agriculture had been for subsistence, but with the introduction of private property in land and the commercialization of agriculture, the purpose of cultivation underwent a change. Though the feudal lord was not any less in terms of exploitation, he had a sense of commitment to the peasant which kept the peasant alive. For instance, the rent dues would be waived at times of famine or crop failure. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her chapter about *Godan*, in her book *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (2014), writes on how the feudal lord has some positive human qualities in him which the capitalist landlord lacks as he is mechanically motivated by economic considerations. The introduction of the British colonial economic policies destroyed the self-sufficient Indian village and established a new type of feudal structure in which the landlord played the role of ‘rural patriarchs’ with the only motive of surplus

¹ Roy, Debal K. Singha. *Peasant Movements in Post-Colonial India: Dynamics of Mobilization and Identity*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004. p. 15

² While the ‘serf’ denotes the cultivator/producer in the feudal system, the ‘farmer’ is a category used in the post-feudal agrarian structure wherein the cultivator/producer is free from the landlord and such a system, but is dependent on the market. (Dhanagare, D. N. *Populism and Power- Farmers’ Movement in Western India: 1980-2014*. Oxon: Routledge, 2016)

extraction. As Sumon Kumar Bhaumik writes in his article, *Peasant Uprisings in Bengal: A Case for Preference Falsification*,

“The feudal lords were clearly exploitative. At the same time, however, stories abound which speak of protection of the peasantry by the same feudal lords, from the hands of invading Mughals and the invading mercenaries from Western India. The feudal lord, in essence, was a parental figure and he could both reward and punish.”³

According to Irfan Habib, historian, the peasant is a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, owning land and cultivates on his or other’s land with his own tools/implements using his own family labour. The peasant has been studied, represented and misrepresented in various streams of social sciences and literature. Though the world has seen peasant uprisings that rocked Western Europe as early as in the fourteenth century, the peasant has often been represented as an idyllic, passive character in society. Literature has played a key role in the making of such a representation of the peasants. As Paul Freedman writes in his essay, *The Peasant Diet: Image and Reality* (2008),

“In pre-modern entertainments for the educated classes the peasants were portrayed as uncomplicated, unscrupulous and unheroic, eager for their next meal and indifferent towards any sort of noble or renunciatory ideal. In literature the peasant is a creature of appetite rather than of thought; practical and self-created rather than adventurous.”⁴

³ Bhaumik, Sumon Kumar. *Peasant Uprisings in Bengal: A Case for Preference Falsification*; *Economic and Political Weekly*: Vol. 37, No. 47 (Nov. 23-29, 2002), p. 4741.

⁴ Freedman, Paul. *The Peasant Diet: Image and Reality*, Valencia: 2008, p. 1

Karl Marx (1818-1883), whose concept of History and change was premised on the revolt of the oppressed, initially believed that the peasants won't be the active participants in the revolution he envisaged. According to him, they are attached to their land and hence had something to lose in the course of revolution.

“Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse... A small holding, a peasant and his family: alongside them another small holding, another peasant and another family... In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitude, such as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.”⁵

Marx and Friedrich Engels had studied only selected societies, which explain such a point of view. Engels goes to the extent of condemning the peasants for their absence in the revolutionary activities in France. However, Engels, around 1890s, did concede that the peasants too would join the workers in the revolution. And this correction did turn out to be true when the world witnessed one of the strongest revolutions that gave birth to the Soviet Union. The Russian Revolution of 1905 and then in 1917, saw a large population of peasants joining the workers in their fight to overthrow the Tsarist regime. This, certainly, was different from the conclusion Marx had arrived at based on his study of the French peasantry during the French revolution. The reality that agrarian societies were different in various parts of the world according to the stages of economic development and that the respective peasants of different countries and regions reacted to different situations was not realized by many scholars during the time. And again, later, about a decade after the Russian Revolution, China saw one of

⁵ Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. *The Class Struggle in France 1848-50 (Selected Works Vol. 1)*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.

the world's most powerful peasant movements. Mao Zedong, in his *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (1927) makes a detailed study about the organization and activities of peasants as a collective social class in the Hunan province and understood the potential of the peasantry as a revolutionary class. The peasants in China had risen against the gentry, the local tyrants and the lawless landlords. The peasants set up their own associations and indulged in all kinds of social activism that benefitted the society. Their achievements, included banning of opium, social gratification, protection of peasants from landlords and so on had influenced Mao in a big way. As Mao observes during the peasant revolution in China in his work, *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan*,

“The main targets of attack by the peasants are the local tyrants, the evil gentry and the lawless landlords, but in passing they also hit out against patriarchal ideas and institutions, against the corrupt officials in the cities and against bad practices and customs in the rural areas. In force and momentum the attack is tempestuous; those who bow before it survive and those who resist perish. As a result, the privileges which the feudal landlords enjoyed for thousands of years are being shattered into pieces... With the collapse of the power of the landlords, the peasant associations have now become the sole organs of authority and the popular slogan ‘All power to the peasant associations’ has become a reality.”⁶

The social formation in India, however, poses some challenges. India is predominantly an agrarian society; however, the pattern of the society here cannot fit into any of the Western models of agrarian structures. Though India had gone through

⁶ Patnaik, Utsa. *The Agrarian Question in Marx and his Successors*. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2011, p. 251.

a stage of feudalism, it was different from Western feudalism. Feudalism in India did not have serfdom and above all, in Indian feudalism, no private property in land existed. The Mughals introduced a land revenue system and bureaucracy to manage it. The society then was broadly divided with the ruling sovereign at the top and the army and peasantry as its branches. As the peasantry fell at the bottom of the structure, the peasants suffered the most. When the Mughals invaded India, many rulers and chiefs resisted them whereas, many acknowledged their supremacy too. The latter category was made *zamindars* by the rulers and they paid tribute to the rulers and collected revenue on their behalf. In return, the *zamindars* got the taxes on their properties waived and at times a share of the revenue too. They exploited the peasants in order to please the rulers as well as to cater to their lifestyle. But an important factor that disappeared with the advent of colonialism was that the land, which the peasant tilled, belonged to the peasantry with hereditary rights. The *zamindar* was only a manager who collected the rent and dues from the peasants and had no rights over their land.

The coming of the British introduced ownership of private land into the Indian system. With the **introduction of private property in land** with acts such as the Permanent Revenue Settlement (1793) in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, the *zamindars* were declared full owners of the land with proprietary rights over the land. And the peasants who had been the virtual owners of the land till then became mere tenants-at-will on their own lands. According to the new policy, if the *zamindar* couldn't collect enough revenue demanded by the Company, he too would be dispossessed and replaced by another *zamindar*. This further pushed the landlord to exploit the peasantry to a greater extent. They also introduced another form of revenue collection in the regions of Madras, Bombay, British-Gujarat and Berar; the **Ryotwari** system

(1820), according to which the land holder or the occupant of the land (ryot) was recognized as the proprietor, but he was a tenant of the State. But a relief was that the peasant could not be evicted as long as he paid the revenue which was fixed for thirty years and subject to revision after that. But again this system came with a flaw that favoured the British and pushed the peasants to extreme difficulties; the flaw was the introduction of revisable assessments according to which the revenue could be revised. Revisions meant that the rent went up by an average of 25% to 60% in the regions that fell under this system. Another system introduced by the British was the **Mahalwari** or **Malguzari** system. According to this system, villages became units of tenure as well as assessment. A culture of co-sharing landlords was introduced. This was introduced in the areas that included United Provinces (except Oudh), Punjab and the Central Provinces. This resulted in several tribal uprisings like that of the Kol and Bhumji revolts (1831-33) in Bihar and Orissa and the Santal Uprising in the Chotanagpur area where a large number of tribal peasants were massacred in 1856. The existing agrarian society was completely shaken up. Land had now become a commodity and the peasant turned into a worker on this 'commoditised' land. This meant that the peasant could be evicted from the land anytime by the landlord. The peasant was no longer connected to the land except for the fact that he tilled on it. And even if a person owned a small amount of land, the landlord knew how to grab it. Ramachandra Mangaraj, a *zamindar* in *Six Acres and Third* (2006), a novel written by Fakir Mohan Senapati, acquires Bhagia's (a weaver) land through trickery and treacherous methods which were legitimated by the British legal system.

And post-1857, when the Empire took over India, a new global phenomenon attacked the Indian peasantry further and created a new wave of exploitation and suffering of the peasantry. The **commercialization of agriculture** disturbed the

already shaken agrarian economy. The Indian peasant was forced to cultivate what was required for the industry in the metropolis and not food for his family and the market. During earlier times, the peasant was left with enough grains to feed his family, cattle and seeds for the next year's sowing. But with the commercialization of agriculture, the peasant who by now was landless in most cases, had to go hungry. Yet another issue was that such methods of agriculture needed a lot more money which the poor peasant and most middle peasants could not afford and hence, they ended up in the debt trap and lost their land. The condition was:

“Firstly, through a network of new transport and communication facilities the Indian countryside was linked with coastal towns and ports. The agricultural produce of the deep interior was now drawn into the world market. Therefore, commercial agriculture- production of cash crops, increased steadily.”⁷

The exploitation by the *zamindar*-moneylender nexus in snatching away lands and turning peasants into tenants and agricultural labourers under the legal system of the colonial government caused various uprisings during this period like that of the Indigo revolt (1859-62), the revolt at Pabna and Bogra (1872-73) and ending with the Deccan Riots in 1875 which led to the Relief Act of 1879 and the Punjab Land Alienation Act, which prevented the transfer of land to non-cultivating classes (mainly the moneylenders). But again this didn't provide much relief for the peasants as exploitation continued at the village level.

“Colonial economic policies, the new land revenue system, the colonial administration and judicial system, and the ruin of handicrafts leading to the

⁷ Dhanagare, D. N. *Peasant Movements in India: 1920-1950*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 37.

over-crowding of land, transformed the agrarian structure and impoverished the peasantry.”⁸

The agrarian social structure varies from region to region in India and cannot be understood as a whole. Many scholars have studied and come to conclusions about the regional differences within the social category of peasants. According to Daniel Thorner, the social categorization of the agrarian society in India is based on three factors: the type of income obtained from the soil (rent, wages, etc.), the nature of rights over the land (landlord, tenant, sharecropper and no rights) and the extent of work performed on the field by these classes (absentee, partial work, work by family and work as a labourer). According to Thorner, the agrarian society in India was broadly classified into *Maliks*⁹ (landlords), *Kisans*¹⁰ (peasants) and *Mazdoors*¹¹ (labourers). Based to the models suggested by scholars like Mao Zedong, Lenin and Thorner, Dhanagare classifies the peasantry in India into the following: (i) **Landlords**, (ii) **Rich peasants** (this included the rich landlords, rich tenants who had substantial holdings and secure occupancy rights and paid nominal rents to the landlords), (iii) **Middle peasants** (landowners of medium size and tenants who have substantial holdings, but not as much as the rich peasants and have to pay higher rents), and (iv) **Poor peasants** (landowners with small holdings not sufficient enough to support the family who end up renting other’s land, tenants with small holdings but

⁸ Chandra, Bipan *et.al. India’s Struggle for Independence*. Calcutta: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 50.

⁹ The *Maliks* were of two kinds: (i) **Big landlords** were absentee landlords who held large tracts of land but had no interest in the management or improvement of the land. (ii) **Rich landlords** were proprietors usually from the same village, who usually did not cultivate but managed the affairs of the land.

¹⁰ The *Kisans* were further divided into two categories: (i) **Small landowners** (has holdings sufficient to support his family and mostly uses family labour), (ii) **Substantial tenants** (tenants leasing land from the *maliks* and whose tenurial rights are usually secure).

¹¹ *Mazdoors* earned their livelihood primarily by working on other’s land or field. They are further divided into three categories: (i) **Poor tenants** (Less secure tenancy rights, landholdings too small to suffice needs of the family and less income), (ii) **Sharecroppers** (cultivating on other’s land on the basis of share cropping where the an amount of the harvest has to be shared) and (iii) **Landless labourer** (has no land or no rights and works as a labourer on other’s fields).

not much secure tenurial rights, tenants-at-will or sharecroppers). Many scholars argue and believe that the middle peasant is the most volatile and revolutionary as he was the most affected by the colonial practices along with the poor peasants. According to Eric Wolf,

“...the middle peasants, and those poor peasants who are outside the power-domain and effective control of their landlords, constitute the pivotal groupings for peasant uprisings.”¹²

Basically, the agrarian structure in India was like that of a pyramid, with the vast landholding, non-cultivating minority on the top and the large population of peasants, sharecroppers, tenants in the middle and labourers who actually worked on the land forming the broad base at the bottom.

The post-independence phase saw the general shift to a socialistic society with the introduction of the Congress Agrarian Reforms and legislations based on that. They introduced peasant proprietorships with inalienable rights over the in order to avoid the growth of big estates. The already existing bigger estates were broken up and many pro-peasant legislations were passed. The Cambridge School of historians began to look at various social movements as individual movements. According to this school, the peasants had respective agendas of their own and the scholars criticized the notion that appropriated the peasant movements into the larger National movement as suggested by the Nationalist and Marxist historians in the country. They considered the peasant movements as individual uprisings that had purpose and reasons of their own and studied them accordingly. Later in this context, in 1983, Ranajit Guha, in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, writes that the peasant struggles during the fight for independence cannot be seen as a

¹² Dhanagare, D. N. Op. cit., p. 11

part of the freedom struggle and that these movements had a soul of their own and should be seen as insurgencies rather than as movements as such.

Peasant Movements in India

“Social isolation, cultural segregation and economic exploitation have accentuated the historical processes of marginalization and political subordination of the peasants. The collective realization and awareness of peasants on these issues have resulted in the outbreak of various historical peasants’ movements throughout the world.”¹³

The peasant movements in India in the 1930s and 1940s had taken a different course in comparison with the peasant revolts prior to it. The peasants by now began organizing themselves and developed the strength to act by themselves across the nation. They began to demand better living standards. The Great Depression of 1929-1934 had worsened the conditions of the farmers to such an extent that they had no other option than fighting for their rights. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 also included no-tax and no-rent movements along with the fight against the colonial exploiters. This period also saw the rise of young, militant cadres in the movement who were heavily influenced by the Left ideology. It was also around this period that the Congress Socialist Party (1934) was formed. This was a consolidation of the Left forces and acted as a national level body to co-ordinate the peasant movements. The All India Kisan Congress was held at Lucknow in 1936 where peasant leaders across India got together in order to discuss their issues. Swami Sahajanand of the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha presided over this conference and N. G. Ranga was elected as the General Secretary. By 1937, the Kisan Manifesto was formulated and this was incorporated into the Congress Working Committee’s manifesto. The Congress

¹³ Roy, Debal K. Singha. Op. cit., pp. 30-31

session at Faizpur in 1936 was a landmark in the history of peasant struggles as the Congress adopted an agrarian programme which included 50% reduction in land revenue and rent, moratorium on debts, abolition of feudal levies, security of tenure for tenants, living wage for agricultural labourers and recognition of peasant unions. The 2nd session of the All India Kisan Congress also took place alongside the Faizpur session of the Indian National Congress. These years served as a 'high-water-mark' in the history of the peasant movements in India. The peasant movements across India in places like Kerala, Bihar, Andhra, Punjab and Bengal, were gathering strength and momentum by this time. Though most of the movements were suspended with the coming of the World War II in 1939, it regained momentum soon after the war ended.

“...the most important contribution of the peasant movements that covered large areas of the sub-continent in the 30s and 40s was that even when they did not register immediate successes, they created the climate which necessitated the post-Independence agrarian reforms.”¹⁴

Kathleen Gough has done extensive studies on the peasant uprisings in India. She studies and records over 77 revolts, under which the smallest one engaged the participation of several thousands of peasants, within the period of her study. She too argues that British rule brought about a degree of suffering among the peasantry which was greater than that during the Mughal times. She lists our thirteen reasons that led to the suffering of the peasants with the coming of the British and few other factors. They are the following:

1. Plunder of the country's wealth along with 'ruinous taxation' of the peasantry.

¹⁴ Chandra, Bipan *et. al.* Op. cit., p. 354

2. The surplus in produce was not stored with the peasants anymore and removed with the help of agents such as landlords, moneylenders, merchants, etc. and traded by the British.
3. The introduction of private property.
4. Increasing encroachment of tribal land and oppression of the tribal people.
5. Destruction of traditional artisanship and handicrafts and introduction of foreign goods into Indian market. (These artisans too turned to agriculture in search of livelihood as tenants, sharecroppers and labourers).
6. Plundering of the resources through export of capital.
7. Forced cultivation of selective crops required as raw materials for industries abroad.
8. Introduction of private property brought about absentee landlordism and land sales became common.
9. Simultaneous population increase after 1921 (It doubled between 1891 and 1961), which led to the fragmentation of land and further loss of land.
10. The introduction of the railways undermined the unity and self-sufficiency of the villages. But this also helped in the growth of nationalism.
11. Famines. (Since the Bengal famine of 1770, India experienced several famines that came in waves and took lives in tons). According to Gough, a total of 20,687,000 deaths were reported due to famine between 1866 and 1943.
12. General laws on land ceiling evaded, which led to the further exploitation of the peasants.
13. Green Revolution (1965-71) caused the marginalization of peasants with small holdings and the rich peasants flourished while the others degenerated.

Gough believes that directly or indirectly, these situations were created by the British colonial policies and led to various peasant movements and uprisings. She categorizes the peasant revolts during the British period into five: **Restorative rebellions** (to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations), **Religious movements** (for the liberation of an ethnic group or region under the new colonial rule), **Social banditry** (a small population of the peasantry who turned to banditry when their means of livelihood were snatched away from them), **Terrorist vengeance** (peasants with ideas of meting out collective justice) and **Mass insurrections** (peasants provided the leadership and were the sole and dominant forces and these were sudden in nature). According to Gough,

“Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings, reaching back at least to the initial British conquest and the last decades of Mughal government. For more than 200 years peasants in all the major regions have risen repeatedly against landlords, revenue agents and other bureaucrats, moneylenders, police and military forces. These uprisings were responses to relative deprivation of unusually severe character, always economic, and often involving physical brutality or ethnic persecution.”¹⁵

RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND SIGNIFICANCE

“Throughout history, peasants have, to put it mildly, been an enigma to those who have tried to deal with them, whether they be monarchs who have tried to govern them or revolutionaries who tried to lead them; tax-collectors whose job it has been to fleece them or welfare workers who want to get them a better deal; social anthropologists who live with them to know them better or

¹⁵ Gough, Kathleen. *Indian Peasant Uprisings*. Economic and Political Weekly. Special Number (August 1974), p. 1403.

historians who unravel their past to comprehend their present and ‘imagine’ their future.”¹⁶

- This research addresses the issue of representation of peasants in Indian literature. Though other fields of social sciences have done extensive studies on the peasants, the representation of peasants in literature seems to be unaddressed so far. However, there have been studies conducted in various languages and regarding specific issues related to the peasants. And these studies are mostly confined to particular areas or periods. This study cuts across geography and cultures spread across India. It also opens a window to understand the peasants as a whole and also interrogates if peasant movements can be considered as a homogenous category.
- The three regions chosen for this research have had different land revenue regimes during the colonial period and this has been looked at length before moving into the analyses of literature in this backdrop. Munshi Premchand’s *Godan* representing the peasants of Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Mulk Raj Anand’s *The Punjab Trilogy* representing Punjab and Sabitri Roy’s *Harvest Song* from Bengal are the texts chosen for close reading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The peasants have been of interest to many scholars of social sciences. For instance, Irfan Habib has tried to understand the peasants during Mughal India as a historian. And the history that followed, especially the peasant movements in the nineteenth and twentieth century have been studied and presented by historians like Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan and so on. Similarly,

¹⁶ Mukherjee, Mridula. *Colonizing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, p. xvi.

sociologists like A. R. Desai, D. N. Dhanagare, Kathleen Gough, Daniel Thorner and Eric Wolf have also studied the Indian peasantry in detail. But when it comes to literature, the peasant has always been present. But the peasant as a hero or a peasant's life from his point of view began to be written later. In many years, we read of the peasant as an idyllic character leading a humble and rustic life. It was this same idyllic peasant who had shed his blood during the Russian revolution. It was this humble and rustic being that created a revolution in China. It was the peasant who came forward joining others to fight for India's independence.

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed a lot of changes in the organization and formation of peasant movements as mentioned above. These movements inculcated nationalistic feelings and the peasants waged a war not only against the *zamindars* but also against the British. It was the idyllic peasant who took such a deep political stand then. The Communist followers and members of the Congress Socialist Party had a very important role in creating such awareness among the peasants.

Though Premchand's *Godan* is called the novel of an Indian peasant, not much visible work has been done on the representation of peasants in the novel. P. C. Joshi's essay, *The sub-altern in Indian literature-Some reflections on Prem Chand and his Godan*, also speaks in detail about the voice of the peasant and his reality. The representation of women in Premchand's works has been vastly dealt with by scholars like Geetanjali Pandey in detail, but it is not relevant to this study. But the peasant remains where he was when it comes to English language. Many scholars have dealt with this theme in Hindi and other languages though. Sudhir Chandra in his article in the *Economic and Political Weekly* titled "Premchand: A Historiographic View" (1981), deals with the representation of the peasants to an extent and more than that places *Godan* in the backdrop of the history of that period. Another notable work on

this novel has been done by Michael Sprinker. His essay, *Marxism and Nationalism: Ideology and Class Struggle in Premchand's Godan* (1989) tells us about the condition of the postcolonial peasant. Kapil Kumar's *Peasants Betrayed: Essays in India's Colonial History* (2010) and Bipan Chandra's *India's Struggle for Independence* (1989) have been read closely in order to develop an understanding of the historical background along with a few other essays. P. C. Joshi's essay, *The subaltern in Indian literature-Some reflections on Prem Chand and his Godan*, also speaks in detail about the voice of the peasant and his reality.

Sabitri Roy's *Harvest Song* originally written in Bengali in the year 1986 and translated to English in 2005 has not been studied hitherto in detail. Except for a few book reviews, the work has not been looked into much. Asok Majumdar's book *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946-1950*, has been read closely to have an understanding of the historical background of the Bengal peasantry and the factors that went into the rise of the Tebagha movement.

Mulk Raj Anand's the Punjab trilogy, which includes *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1939) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) have been studied by many scholars but the representation of the peasantry has not been dealt by many in English language. Partha Nath Mukherji's essay in the Economic Political and Weekly, *The Farmer's Movement in Punjab: Politics of Pressure Groups and Pressure of Party Politics* (1998), talks about the military-feudal-imperial nexus that contributed to the suffering of the peasantry in Punjab and the factors that led to the Land Ceiling Act in the post-independence period. Jonathan Highfield in his essay, *Finding the Voice of the Peasant: Agriculture, Neocolonialism and Mulk Raj Anand's Punjab Trilogy* (2009), has done immense and valuable research on the representation of the peasantry and the Indian village by Anand in his Punjab Trilogy. Atma Ram's

edited volume *Mulk Raj Anand: A Reader* (2011) provides information and the biographical details that influenced the author's mind in producing the Trilogy. Mridula Mukherjee's *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory* provides historical information and facts about the agrarian society in Punjab and the factors of transition from feudalism to pre-capitalism that brought about the worsening of the conditions of the peasants under the British regime. She also talks in detail about the nature of the peasant movements and the reasons for such uprisings.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

- The objective of this research is to understand the peasant through their representation in literature.
- The selected texts are read as a product of the period in which the text was produced.
- The romanticized image of the peasant as an idyllic and rustic being is looked into and examined.
- The transition from feudalism to a pre-capitalistic society and then the years of independence is studied. The Congress Agrarian Reforms and the revolutionary role of the Communists and other Left leaning platforms is also looked into.
- The basic objective of this research is to have a clear understanding of the peasant, as represented in the selected texts from Indian literature. The reason behind choosing the time period of 1930s and 1940s is because this period saw a different wave of peasant movements in India which is taken up in this study.

RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Methods

Close reading of texts, visit to libraries and archives, travel and fieldwork where open ended conversations with scholars on the subject were carried out.

Methodology

The methodology to conduct this research is a close reading of the selected texts and also other texts on peasant and agriculture from the regions. The reading follows Marxist Literary criticism by locating these texts in the society that produced them as suggested by Terry Eagleton. According to Eagleton,

“Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies- the ideas, values and feelings by which men experience their societies at various times. And certain of those ideas, values and feelings are available to us only in literature.”¹⁷

Marxist literary criticism is a method or way of reading and analyzing the text in terms of the historical conditions and times which produced it. In simple terms, the chosen text for analysis is read as a product of the time and society in which the text was produced. The socio-economic and political background of the author is also taken into consideration as it plays an important role in the production of the literary work as an author is “individually placed in the society, responding to a general history from his own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his own concrete terms.”¹⁸ It aims to explain literature as a whole by giving attention to the form, style and meaning which is all a product of a particular history. The research also reads the

¹⁷ Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Suffolk: Routledge Classics, 2015, pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 7

text alongside co-texts, which according to Stephen Greenblatt's suggestion, to 'historicity of the text' and the 'textuality of history'. Therefore, this reading is conducted parallel to the reading of the history of the same period. Hence following New Historicism alongside Marxist literary criticism. It also makes use of cultural materialism as importance is given to the politicized framework in which the selected texts were produced as it is argued that the economic base alone doesn't determine the superstructure, but at the same time it cannot be independent of it. The function of institutions which brings us the text today cannot be ignored. This also helps in a better understanding of the present situation of the peasants in India. The primary sources include the selected novels. The secondary source includes:

- The historical texts and documents on peasants
- The agrarian societies and movements
- Archival material on various peasant movements.

CHAPTER DIVISION

Chapter I: Introduction

The first Chapter provides with the historical background of the agrarian society in India and a history of peasant movements in India. It forms the backdrop in which the selected texts are read and located in. It defines Marxist Literary Criticism in which the texts are read and understood. It also tries to understand the very concept of the peasant and also the various types of people working on the land. This chapter also addresses the various methods through which Indian peasantry have been studied.

Chapter II: *The Lulu Trilogy* and the Punjab Peasantry

Mulk Raj Anand's the Punjab trilogy is analyzed within the framework of Marxist Literary Criticism. The texts are placed along with historical texts written on the same period and the historicity of the texts is examined. In Punjab there was migration of farmers into the Army. The novels of Anand deal with this issue and the rise of resistance within the peasantry against the local tyranny as well as the British rule, and by the third novel, one perceives the writer's inclination towards Marxism.

Chapter III: The Uttar Pradesh Peasantry and Premchand's *Godan*

In this chapter, after discussing in brief the historical situation in these regions, Munshi Premchand's *Godan* is taken up for close literary analyses. This text is placed in the villages of Eastern Uttar Pradesh in the 1930s India. The protagonist Hori, in the novel represents the ideal and rustic peasant that has been represented in literature for years. His dream of acquiring a cow and the atrocities that surround the life of the peasant is dealt with in this novel and that aspect is looked into at length. This research relates history with the text and the common understanding of a peasant's life and his dreams.

Chapter IV: The Tebagha Movement of Bengal and *Harvest Song*

Sabitri Roy narrates in her novel, *Harvest Song*, the beginning of the Tebagha Movement and the days that preceded it. The novel is read alongside other existing histories and the representation of peasants in the Bengal region is looked into. The development of the Tebagha Movement as a peasant movement and the role of the Communists in the movement are studied in this novel.

Chapter V: Conclusion: The Later Years and the Peasant Question

This chapter summarizes the various points of views which emerge through the literary imagination of the texts taken up for close study in this dissertation. It also attempts to connect this research, analyzing briefly how these texts shape the vision of the peasants in years to come and in contemporary history and literature, opening up avenues for further discourse.

Chapter I

The Lulu Trilogy and the Punjab Peasantry

“During the British colonial rule, the military-feudal-imperial nexus operated through the canal colonies, enabling the Britishers to extract large profits through colonial extraction. Contradictions within this feudal agrarian system led to peasant mobilisations over tenurial rights, largely under the Kisan Sabha of the Communist Party, culminating in the Land Ceiling Act in the post-independent period.”¹

The Punjab of the Past: An Introduction

Punjab, the land of five rivers has been associated with two things: Sikhism and agriculture. The land of five rivers is well irrigated, lush and green. But this land too went through the worst of famines and exploitation, tumults and crises. Various phases of peasant movements and years of struggle have made the conditions of the peasants better than it used to be. This chapter will attempt a close reading of Mulk Raj Anand’s Punjab Trilogy- *The Village (1938)*, *Across the Black Waters (1939)* and *The Sword and the Sickle (1942)*, placing it in the time and society that produced it and understand the representation of peasantry in the novels. The chapter also attempts to read the novels alongside historical texts dealing with the same period and societies. It attempts a Marxist literary criticism of the selected texts. As Anand himself said,

“I realised, when I told Mr. Forster that I hoped to write about the situation in the Indian peasant life, that it had changed from tradition when no one owned

¹ Mukherji, Partha Nath. *The Farmer’s Movement in Punjab: Politics of Pressure Groups and Pressure of Party Politics*. Economic and Political Weekly: Vol. 33, No. 18 (May 2-8, 1998), p. 1043.

land but had rights in land. Lord Cornwallis had changed this. His Permanent Settlement Act, by which ownership of land was given to big landlords and even small peasants while big peasants flourished in drought, small peasants had no harvest. They tended to sell out their land and emigrate to big towns and become workers in factories. Thus had arisen the proletariat which was now demanding human conditions as in European countries where industrial system had become current.”²

In 1953, a legislation was passed enabling tenants to become owners of their lands; the Punjab (Security of Land Tenures Act) or the Punjab Act X of 1953 ensured this. The road to this, however, was not laid in a single day, but a journey that spanned over decades of struggle and peasant agitations. The fight against landlords and moneylenders on the one hand and the colonial government and the Union Ministry on the other was one that protracted for years before leading to the improvement of the conditions of the agrarian society. Like every other agrarian society in India, Punjab too was affected during the transition from feudal society to a pre-capitalist society. The immediate effect of the new agrarian policies introduced under the British regime was that the small peasants were mostly alienated from their land. In Punjab, the British managed to make changes in the society, but did not completely get rid of the feudal practices. Hence, it would be proper to call the Punjab of the twentieth century a semi-feudal, pre-capitalistic agrarian society. As Jonathan Highfield quotes Anand,

“Imperialism destroyed the basis of the old village life and mechanically imposed a superstructure from the top. It sapped the whole foundation of the self-sufficient feudal village, but left another feudalism in its place. It

² Ram, Atma (ed.). *Mulk Raj Anand: A Reader*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2011.

destroyed the ancient forms, but left the festering sores of an age-long decay beneath the surface without making any serious attempt to heal the sick body, except treating it with patent medicines. It broke up and changed India, but refused to renew it.”³

Punjab has a history of peasant agitations that provided the peasants a strong platform to launch massive peasant movements and the peasants became a significant part of the political organizations in the post-independent years. During the late 1850s and early 1860s, the region witnessed the earliest of the mobilized struggle by the peasant after the colonization of India by the British. In the **Kooka Movement** also known as the **Namdhari Movement** the Sikh peasants fought against the British regime. The movement was religious and social reformist in nature. Another important motive of the movement was to restore Sikh sovereignty and protest against the ‘modernity’ that the British sought to impose.

The Agrarian agitation of 1907 occurred as a reaction to the Punjab Land Colonisation Bill that was passed on the 25th of October, 1906. This Bill sought to bring changes in the conditions for land grants to colonists in the canal colonies⁴. And in November 1906, there was an increase of the canal water rates by an average of 25 percent on normal crops and up to 50 percent on the special crops in the region surrounding the Bari Doab canal. It was also around the same period that the land revenue was increased in the Rawalpindi district, presently in Pakistan. The British

³ Highfield, Jonathan. *Finding the Voice of the Peasant: Agriculture, Neocolonialism and Mulk Raj Anand's Punjab Trilogy*. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities: Vol.1, No.2, Autumn 2009; p. 2.

⁴ The British controlled the water sources and levied water taxes or *abiana* on the peasants in order to use the water from the canal for irrigation purposes. The British regime used this in order to extract large profits through colonial extraction.

regime and their off-shoots: landlords and moneylenders were exploiting the already beaten down peasant.

“The Colonization Bill of 1906 sought to legalize the imposition of fines, declare the colonies outside the purview of the courts and make the conditions governing the grant of land more stringent, especially by introducing a new rule which flouted the customary law of inheritance by insisting upon primogeniture and even the lapse of land to the government in case there were no male heirs. It further sought to debar the colonists from purchasing property rights in the land, thus altering an earlier provision whereby they could purchase these rights after an initial period of probation as crown tenants.”⁵

There were massive protests and agitation against the Bill. The peasants were mobilised and led by Lala Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who happens to be the uncle of the legendary Bhagat Singh. Following the peasant movement, the Bill was vetoed by the Viceroy and the Government of Punjab soon withdrew the enhancement of water rates. The Bill was improved upon and became an Act later in 1912. This movement of the 1907 had its impact on the years to come and the combination of militant nationalism and peasants’ struggle for their rights remained as a popular memory and continued to inspire generations to come years later.

“The agitation of 1907 demonstrated to the government the potential of agrarian grievances becoming major issues of agitation unless they were handled with care and that the proverbial “loyalty” of the Punjabi peasants- a loyalty that was essential if the peasant communities were to continue to be

⁵ Mukherjee, Mridula. *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004, p. 27.

designated as “martial races” from which a major component of the British Indian army was recruited- could no longer be taken for granted; it would have to be continually monitored and actively maintained.”⁶

The ensuing years witnessed many more radical movements like the **Ghadar Movement**. The movement had originated among a community of Indian immigrants consisting of small land-holding Sikh peasant families, Indian students and exiled Indians on the West Coast of North America. They were spreading ideas of democracy and revolution and this threatened the British. They brought out a newspaper named *Ghadar* in 1913 that spoke of nationalist ideas. The **Komagata Maru** incident added fuel to this movement. A ship with about 376 Indians from various parts of South and South-east Asia was turned away from the coast of Vancouver where they were supposed to land. The ship was sent back to Calcutta on the excuse of the outbreak of the World War I and the passengers were not allowed to set foot on any other land but Calcutta. On reaching Calcutta an entanglement with the police resulted in the death of 18 voyagers and the arrest of about 202 others. A few had managed to escape. Indians all over the world were called in order to fight against the colonial domination and a surprisingly large number of about 8000 people heeded the call. But various government policies didn't allow them to mobilize together and act. Another reason for the failure of the movement was the lack of interest that the Indian villages showed in the movement. The agitators couldn't convince the peasants from the Indian villages to the extent they thought they could. The movement concluded with conspiracy trials during which 45 revolutionaries were executed and over 200 others were imprisoned for lifetime.

⁶ Ibid. p. 29

“Despite its apparent failure, the Ghadar Movement was to have a powerful impact on Punjab politics and especially on the peasants. It established a tradition of militant and secular anti-imperialism, enriched in subsequent years by social radicalism, which was to continue to inspire subsequent generations. The movement threw up a committed leadership which, despite the tremendous depletion of its ranks due to repression, played a crucial role in the development of the peasant movement from the 1920s to the 1940s.”⁷

Soon after movements like the **Akali Movement** (1920-25), which took an anti-feudal, anti-imperialist, non-violent and democratic nature, emerged. It was religious in nature and insisted that the management of *gurudwaras* should be by the elected representatives from among the Sikhs and not *mahants*, landlords or colonial agents. By 1921, there was a division in the Akali movement and the **Babbar Akali Movement** which took to militant and violent forms of protest, emerged.

By controlling the resources of land and water, the British had complete control over this region and hence exploitation had become common. When the crown was in need of money, the colonial government would squeeze the peasants to their bones. By dismissing the rights to land to the semi-nomadic tribes of western-Punjab, the British appropriated vast swathes of fertile agricultural land and it was turned to sources of income to the crown. And if the crown left a breathing gap by mistake, the landlord and moneylender would see to it that they fill in those gaps too. As days passed, the peasants were becoming tenants, agricultural labourers and even daily wage labourers in the towns and small industries in the villages. According to Partha Nath Mukherjee, the agrarian systems in British Punjab showed three patterns:

⁷ Ibid. p. 32

“The first related to the canal colonies, where a technological engineering feat was combined with social engineering. The main contradictions within the canal colonies arose out of the colonial interests of ‘political entrenchment, revenue extraction and military requirements.’ It idealised the construction of a peasant society, yet introduced into it elements of a strong feudal aristocracy, misnaming them as ‘capitalist’ grants... The second is to be found in the princely states where feudal exploitation and opposition to it was sharpest. The third, in the settled areas, mounting debt and land alienations, particularly after the post-war depression, provided the basis for peasant struggles.”⁸

In this backdrop, we will now look into the select novels, *The Village* (1938), *Across the Black Waters* (1939) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942). It is also pertinent to note here that Anand, in many ways, was influenced by these very radical trends that had influenced the peasantry in Punjab; it was as much agrarian distress, religious identity and the ideology of communism in equal measures. The three selected texts will be dealt with the order of the chronology of their publication.

The Beginning: Lulu and *The Village*

Anand’s *The Village* is set in the Indian village of Nandpur, sandwiched between the two British-built towns, Sherkot and Manabad. In the first scene of the novel Nihal Singh is seen walking out of the Nandpur railway station after a cramped journey in the third class compartment of a train from Manabad, already tired due to the noise and pollution caused by emission in the city, which he detested. His simple nature is seen as he puts on his shoes once he is outside the train. The fear of losing it in the crowd had made him carry it in his hands during the journey. He had a shapeless

⁸ Mukherji, Partha Nath. Op. cit., p. 1047.

bundle in his hand and he began walking towards his village, about a mile and a half away from the railhead. The noise from the starting of the engine of the train made the man shiver in fear. He paused, smiled with a sense of embarrassment and continued walking. As he approached the village he meets his son Lal Singh (Lalu) who was working on their fields. Lalu realised that Nihalu was upset for two reasons: Their produce of cotton and maize he had carried to the market didn't fetch a high price in the town as the prices in the market had crashed and the litigation over their land never seemed to end. Vakil Balmukund, the lawyer, only showed hesitation to perform, but not from fleecing his clients. Nihalu wondered on ways to pay the rent to the government. Nihalu remembered the past when the Sikhs took on the *ferungis* (British) and fought hard to maintain their religious order and resist colonial modernity. But the battle was lost eventually and the British had taken Punjab by deceit and fraud according to Nihalu. The British introduced new systems under which the peasant society degraded and suffered. Nihalu himself had lost ten acres he had inherited due to the thuggery of the Sarkar. Not only were their lands appropriated, but a class of men who favoured them in the war against the people who lived in these lands, were made landlords. One such landlord was Teja Singh. And now, his son Harbans Singh, who according to Nihalu, carried the lineage of a traitor, had taken five more acres of land from the old man. Nihalu was left with just ten acres to cultivate now. He had been fighting the case against Harbans Singh for about ten years now and believed that one final day, justice will prevail. Meanwhile in the market, the middlemen-*bania* exploited the peasants by buying up the produce at a cheap price by haggling and bargaining and selling them off at higher prices. Nihalu here is just one example of the multi-level exploitation a regular peasant faced. Nihalu was also against modernity and believed that the traditional ways of life had a

rationale and modernity was tearing the traditional society apart. He was deeply religious too.

Lalu was different from his father in many ways. Lulu knew that his father was being taken for a ride by the lawyer regarding the case though Nihalu insisted that it was due to the delay caused by the colonial judiciary. Lulu knew it from the back of his mind that the lawyer was not efficient enough too. He was also aware of the middlemen in the towns exploiting the peasants from the village, which was unfortunately accepted by the older generation peasants. Apart from this, Lulu questioned religion and was fascinated by the West. He appreciated the ideas of modernity and often debated with his father about this. When Nihalu believed that the train caused so many disturbances with noise and air pollution, Lulu saw it as a faster and efficient mode of transport than that of the regular cart. But again Nihalu argued that one could still smuggle petty items into the towns if it was transported through carts and that the customs officer at the railway stations mostly collect bribes, which they held a virtue, along with the taxes the peasants had to pay. Modernity and the advancement of technology meant the coming of the age of darkness for Nihalu; but to Lulu it was the beginning of life and light at the end of a dark tunnel. Lulu was sent to study in a missionary school in Sherkot by Nihalu. The missionary education did fulfil its duty by producing a white mind in an Indian body.⁹

Nihalu strongly believed that the only reason for the present condition of the peasants were the British policies introduced in order to gain to themselves political superiority and control over the colonies. Nihalu also considered that the increasing indebtedness of the peasantry was due to the heavy taxes levied on water and land by the British. It was not only the peasants who were affected with the world shrinking in

⁹ This idea is enunciated by Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Mask*.

time and space. Sheikhu, the potter no longer made pots, but worked at the brick-baking industry. The transition from an artisan to a wage labourer was also the fallout of the British policies and industrial revolution. Similarly, Miraj Din, the village blacksmith now worked at the Power House and Jhandu, formerly a peasant was now plying a *yekka* (horse cart) on hire. Nihal loved his village and his world revolved around his village.

“And walking along this road, Nihal Singh sensed a kinship with the familiar earth. He felt the invisible warmth of the sheltered lives in the village where he was respected. He sniffed the air as if it were nectar and gazed upon the landscape as if it were heaven full of the ineffable bliss of life, full of men and women and children and animals and fruits and flowers.”¹⁰

Gujri, Nihal’s wife was a simple woman too. Her family meant everything to her and Lalu was the favourite of her three sons. Her daughters, Ishri, Meli and Aqi had been married off to other families and hence they lived in their respective in-laws’. Sharm Singh, her eldest son was married to Kesari, a city-bred and lived in the house. Her other son, Dayal Singh too lived with them. Dayal was deeply religious and very saint-like in his ways of life. Gujri detested the city for the only reason that she disliked the ways of her daughter-in-law, Kesari. Gujri was an ardent believer and had small dreams in which she had decided to keep Lalu to herself even if the other sons left her at different points of time.

As the family sat by the fields, having their lunch prepared by Gujri, Harnam Singh, Lalu’s uncle, joined them. He too was concerned about the falling prices of their produces in the towns. He had heard from the town of Sherkot that the Sarkar was buying up most of the harvest at cheap rates and storing it in their granaries so

¹⁰ Anand, Mulk Raj. *The Village*. Bombay: Kutub-Popular, 1960, p. 12.

that they could create demand and sell it later at higher prices to these very peasants. This was done alongside the increasing in taxes by the government. The prices at which the crops were selling and the taxes levied on the peasants seemed to be growing inversely proportional, further burdening the peasant. And in desperation to meet ends and avoid eviction, many peasants were selling off their produces at very low rates. Nihalu says in a saintly manner, “Honour and profit were never found in the same dish.”¹¹ This is followed by a dialogue between Nihalu and Harnam Singh in Anand’s narrative:

“‘I don’t know,’ said Harnam Singh, ‘what the Sarkar is up to. Last year we were told to grow as much as we could and that we would get a market for it, and good profit. And now we have to sell the crop for less money than one-tenth of the interest we owe on the price of the seed....’”¹²

The discussion continues and as the men were holding the government intervention responsible for their miseries, the topic of an ensuing election came up. Harnam reflected then that he would vote for anyone who would give the peasants a fair market and protection against rent. The lives of the villagers and the peasants revolved around farming and the market. Their day began with hard work and ended with lamenting thoughts on the mounting debts.

While the older generation only dreamt of such achievements, Lalu had a lot more on his mind. Lalu was happy that he could work so well on the fields. He dreamt of a day when he would use modern technology and increase the harvest on their fields. He wished to unburden his father and wanted to take over the responsibilities. He also wished to cut off his long hair and couldn’t understand why the elders in the

¹¹ Ibid. p. 22

¹² Ibid. p. 23

village insisted on religious orders that created inconvenience to human beings. He also detested the superstitions that floated around the village and despised Mahant Nandgir, the religious head, who ran an ashram in the village. He knew the nexus between the Mahant and the landlord and their exploitative nature. The Mahant used religion to oppress and control the already oppressed peasant. In a way, he kept the peasants intoxicated with hemp and religion making them subtle and silent. He dreamt of the farming methods abroad from what he had heard and read. But he also knew that such adaptations would only welcome mockery in his village. He dreamt of distant lands as he worked on his own land. He also had issues with the dirt that accumulated everywhere in the village and wished for an even more hygienic environment to live in.

The annual fair was on in the town and Lalu had decided to go there along with his friends, Churanji, the son of the moneylender and Gughi, Jhandu's son. They decided to smuggle themselves hiding in a hay cart, to the city. Though the other boys were fooling around, Lalu's mind wandered as he saw the freshly ploughed land on either sides of the road. The monsoons had not been so good that year and Lalu was worried about this. The peasants were going hungry too as the ever-growing market had depleted all their produce. Lalu realised his attachment to the land and that all he had seen and learnt while growing up was related to this very earth. It was also during this journey that he first met Maya, the daughter of the landlord whom he would later marry and live with. As morning approached, they were entering the city and the very beginning offered a sight of the ugliness of civilization. Their cart was stopped in the check-post and the *Munshi* there began picking on the kids and collected a bribe from the driver eventually. The town, even while having its own share of excitement in the young minds, made Lalu feel nauseated and disgusted as he realised that the villagers

were being ill-treated and taken for fools there. From the police to the stall-keepers, all abused and exploited the rustic villagers. The peasants, on the other hand, came to the fairs, wasted all their money on merry-making and went back to their indebted beds. On reaching the fair they soon ended up splitting into two groups as Gughu and Churanji got very excited as Lalu lay to take rest for a while. When they were having breakfast at an eatery, the man there began abusing Gughu as he didn't want people from the lower castes contaminating his stall. At this Lalu flared up and thus put an end to the issue. Lalu's dream and vision about an equal society in which everyone had their space and respect is visible through his actions. The fair was filled with such stalls that made easy money by fooling the rustics. From oils that promised to bring back lost manliness to seeds that would produce extra yield, the fair was filled with money-traps. In the midst of all this, one stall caught Lalu's attention. The British Indian army was recruiting young Indians from the region¹³ and there was a large crowd around that stall as the man with the mouthpiece made promises of journeys to faraway lands. And even if one couldn't go to faraway places, one could have the privilege of wearing the uniform and a pay of eleven rupees a month and land grants for people who serve in wars. The man, Lehna Singh, was singing praises for the Empire and the Sarkar and Lalu thought it too good to be true and walked away. The day soon came to end and all of them got ready to leave. But it was at this juncture that something bad happened. Lalu decided to have his hair cut and did so. The final stretch towards home filled Lalu with fear and jitteriness. As expected, there was a storm in the house when they came to know that he had cut his hair. And when the row at home was over, Hardit Singh, son of Harbans Singh, the landlord came along with the priest of the temple, Arjan Singh and blackened Lalu's face. They didn't stop

¹³ The British realised the need for the inclusion of this martial race into the British Indian army after they realised the capacity of these men during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny and their involvement in rebellious movements like the Kooka Movement and above all, their resistance to the Moghuls.

with this; they put him on a donkey and took him around the village. Lalu tried to break free from their clutches, but in vain. And when he finally did, he ran away. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him and wondered why he had to go through such humiliation. He wanted to leave the village but the dutiful son in him held him back. He returned and though life was not the same as before, he was back on the fields.

Lalu's hate for the village elders increased and he began despising customs and superstitions even more now. Lalu didn't talk much from now and related to the nature around him. He realised his helplessness against the established order, both at home and outside the home. He felt this anger from within that didn't seem to have an escape route. He suppressed it and continued ploughing the fields. He dreamt of the day when he could run away; but again the dutiful son in him didn't allow him to do so. He wished his life had not changed like this just because he had his hair cut. But unfortunately, it had changed now, leaving him an affected person.

“...to go a-borrowing was to go a-sorrowing”¹⁴ thought Lalu when his mother asked him to accompany Nihalu and Sharm Singh (Lalu's elder brother) to go to the moneylender in order to get some money to meet the land revenue demands. When Lalu looked at the agreement to be signed, he was surprised to see that they had to pay one-third of their earnings as revenue to the Sarkar though their crops were destroyed by pests and then affected by drought. Alongside, the family also had to raise money for Dayal Singh's wedding. Such a crisis forced them to go to the village *sahukar* (moneylender). When they went to the moneylender, Lalu soon lost his cool and was asked to leave. Though they managed to get an amount, Rupees two hundred, after a long session of pleadings and explanations, by mortgaging the harvest of corn they had for themselves. Most of the family jewellery was already lying with Chaman Lal,

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 108

and now, they had given up their hungry bellies too. Though there were legislations against attachment of the debtor's property by non-agriculturalist money lenders, the moneylenders saw to it that they fleeced the peasants in all other ways by looting them. And the land he could not attach, the British government was doing it. Lalu was sent to pay the land revenue and as he stood in the long queue he reflected,

“And he thought gloomily of the relentless official who would accept the wad of money, and another, and another, year after year, while his family sank into debt. They would soon have to feed the cattle on thistles and long grass just as that man was feeding his cow, while the granaries of Seth Chaman Lal, the landlord and the Sarkar multiplied with grain weighing hundreds of pounds. It was all manoeuvred with such deft and sure cunning, with such click grace. And the peasants were an easy prey-such fools, ignorant, groping fools, and the whole cause of their ruin was debt.”¹⁵

Soon the village was buzzing with excitement over the visit Mr. Hercules Long, the Deputy Commissioner and the head of the district. It was said that he was very friendly to the peasants and sensitive on their issues and withheld justice. He was born in India and went abroad for his education. His parents had come to India as part of the British administration and settled in India. He was also one of the initiators and promoters of the Boy Scout Movement in India and Lalu had remembered him from his school days. On his visit he encouraged the Boy Scout movement to be launched in the village and made Lalu in-charge of it. Lalu glowed with pride and so did his friends as they were considered to be loafers in the village. Though the movement started with a lot of motivation, it was soon lost in the narrow alleys of the village. By now, arrangements for Dayal's marriage were in full swing and the house was filled

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 119

with the women from the community and men getting things ready for the wedding. But Lalu felt detached from all this and kept himself busy with his chores.

“He wanted to hurt himself, to hurt someone, anyone, to destroy and disrupt and annihilate mankind, to throw ashes on the beards of all the elders, on the heads of the womenfolk. He wanted to violate all their sacred rules and superstitions, to uproot all his own feelings and trample upon the dust, to negate, deny, destroy everything, every place, everyone.”¹⁶

It was during such a time that Maya happened to visit Gujri often with her mother as part of the preparation for the ceremony. The hidden love in him overpowered him and one day as they were playing together along with a few other children, Harbans Singh caught them and turned furious. He left soon, but on this account, got a fake case registered on Lalu and brought Napoo Singh, the police officer to arrest him. There was a big scuffle following this in which Nihalu too got involved. During the confusion, Lalu, overcome with fear and disgust, fled the village. And unlike in the past, this time he left for real.

The British Indian Army

Lalu had gone to the town. He had no place to hide and an empty stomach to fill. Once again he saw Havildar Lehna Singh recruiting young men into the British Indian army. Lalu listened to him once again, but this time with seriousness. And this time, the pay of eleven rupees per month, rations, *khakhi* uniforms, white mufti and the promise to go to the faraway lands as a major war (World War I) was approaching seemed attractive; it came with an additional bonus of escaping the clutches of the police who would soon come pursuing him. By the end of the day, Lehna Singh took

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 147

seven young men with him to be recruited to the 68th Rifles at the Ferozpur cantonment. All of them were excited as they boarded the train; the promises made by Lehna Singh were luxuries to the peasants. Lalu remained confused if he had done the right thing by attempting to enlist himself. Though Lalu was aware that the military too had a significant role in the exploitation of the peasants, he had nowhere else to go and joining the army seemed to be his only escape route. Lalu says, “He who loses his jewels has to join up with the thieves.”¹⁷

As Lalu and the others were presented before the doctor for medical examination before the enlisting, the police arrived there with a warrant for his arrest, Lalu stood frozen. At that juncture Captain Owen, an officer in the army intervened and resolved the issue and asked the police to leave. He was impressed with Lalu and was surprised to find an Indian villager able to converse in English. Hence, Lalu was enlisted and became a part of the British Indian army. He now had a new identity: Lal Singh, Recruit No. 12444, 2 Platoon, B Company, 68th Rifles. And the arrest warrant against him was withdrawn by Harbans as Lalu was now a soldier of the Sarkar.

But soon Lalu realised that the promises made by Lehna Singh were lies. Life in the army was nothing that he dreamt of. He got into issues with one of his superior officers and that made things even worse for him. Most of the soldiers present were peasants who had been driven out of their own lands due to various revenue policies of the colonial government. They had all gone through the oppression by the landlord and resorted to joining the army as a source of livelihood as they had nowhere to go. Life was not all that different from their past, but life had to go on.

“The mute and the patient peasant in Lal Singh, the primitive natural son of the soil, who was descended from the dim nation of stalwart men hardened by

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 170

long duress, who had furrowed the slumberous earth and felt a sense of power in the sweating sinews of his flesh, the elemental creature who had heard tales of long strifes and battles which his ancestors had fought to win their land, found kinship with the sepoy after all, at least with some of them.”¹⁸

Lalu, meanwhile, had become close to two people from his platoon; Uncle Kirpu and Daddy Dhanoo. Both of them were old, but Lulu felt comfortable spending time with them as he could relate better to them. Kirpu too was once a peasant with forty acres of land. But the calamity of a drought caused crop failure which led to arrears in payment of land revenue. Eventually all the land got attached to the Sarkar. Hence, with nowhere to go and hunger to subside, Uncle Kirpu joined the army twenty years before Lulu met with a similar fate. He remembered the time before the British arrived when the King would exempt tax if there had been failure of crops. But the highly fatalistic Kirpu considered all this a play of fate and preached that all one could do was obey the Sarkar. Daddy Dhanoo was even more religious than Kirpu. Dhanoo too had been a victim of circumstances. The failure of rains for three successive years had caused severe crop failure in the region from where he came. He was a peasant and a cowherd who was forced to become a tenant and then a labourer after eviction and now a sepoy. Most of the peasants from his village were either becoming landless labourers or joining the army. Serving the very Sarkar that exploited them in many ways was the only option thousands of Indian peasants had in order to stay alive. Days passed and one day Lulu received a message that his father had taken ill and hence he was given leave from the army. He rushed towards his village, his home. Though he had been sending all his earning to his home, he felt a

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 189

little awkward returning home because the circumstances under which he had to leave was nothing to be celebrated about.

On his return, he came to know of the fatal mishaps his family had gone through. Lalu met Jhandu outside the station and Jhandu narrated him the tale of woes. As soon as Lalu left, Dayal's marriage was called off on account of the incidents. Sharm Singh had murdered Hardit Singh, the son of the landlord as he saw him, along with the Mahant, with Kesari on the banks of a river having a drinking party. The word had gone around the village that Kesari had become a characterless woman. Nihalu ended up mortgaging more of his land in order to meet the expenses of the lawyer he had engaged to fight the case for his eldest son and that went down the drain as Sharm Singh was sentenced to be hanged in Manabad jail. After this, Nihalu is morally collapsed and the family went to ruins. On meeting Nihalu, Lalu was drawn to him with a pitying affection. A man who had fought all his life and stood erect was now lying in bed, frail and broken, waiting for death to liberate him. Nihalu was proud of Lalu ever since he joined the army. For once, the harvest was good; but the world around them had fallen apart. When Lalu rested, he felt the urge to get back to the cantonment as he detested his village for all that had happened. He wished to earn enough, return and clear all the debts and redeem the mortgages, jewellery and land and live a life he dreamed of, as a peasant without debts; a peaceful peasant. He also realised that his uncle Harnam Singh too was not in a great condition. He told Lalu of how the peasants had been exploited by the merchants in the city as they paid almost nothing for the harvest and he ended up mortgaging all his land as he had no money to pay the revenue. The Sarkar too had a role to play in this ruination of the peasants as they regulated the prices according to their wishes, pushing the peasants into deep hellholes. All the Sarkar did was sending the *patwari*

from time to time to collect the rent. In the ancient times and later under feudalism, the feudal lord had the responsibility to keep the farmer alive, but this Sarkar didn't care about the peasant.

“Harnam Singh looked about him, sighed and said: ‘Nothing son...only I am ruined. I have had to mortgage the whole of my land to Chaman Lal. But I am not the only one, almost the whole village is ruined.’”¹⁹

Lalu sat back and reflected to himself after Harnam Singh had left. The entire world in which he grew up was now falling apart. Lalu felt very alienated and detached from the village. He could no longer relate with his cronies with whom he had spent hours doing nothing. The next day, Harnam and Lalu took a walk. Harnam Singh revealed shamefully that he had taken up a part-time job at the Power House as a labourer. This was a matter of shame for a peasant. Lalu realised that more and more peasants were giving up farming and going to the towns in search of meagre jobs for that kept the ovens at home burning. Back home, Lalu had a conversation with his father and Nihalu also blamed the Sarkar for the present conditions of the peasants.

“And he talked to Lalu of the days of his youth when he had raised good harvests and filled the barn with overflowing with grain and with pitchers of money, when he had three cows and a horse tied in the courtyard, and had bought and sold at the proper season, and turned a good balance between profit and loss. He talked to the boy about the time when the seeds of their present misfortunes were sown, of when the ferungis came with their railgadis which took away the grain from the villages at the lowest prices. The ferungis, the ferungis. For he could never forgive the ferungis for all the new-fangled

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 209

machines they had brought in, the heavy taxes they levied and their bad justice.”²⁰

Lalu’s leave was coming to an end and he had to return to his cantonment. Though his mother wished for him to stay, he had to leave. Only this time, he got a warm farewell with all the villagers walking along the cart that carried him and his luggage for a long way. The news of the war had reached Lalu but he knew nothing about it. A new sense of curiosity filled within him. He returned soon but no one knew exactly what was happening except for the officers. But the news of the war excited most of them as they knew that if they served well in the war and fought brave, the Sarkar would grant them land. And for the peasants, land meant more than life. Fighting on the front also meant an increase in the allowance they got. Lalu too began dreaming of a better life and improvement of the state of his own household. He wished to come back after the war and go back home with all the money he would make. No matter how faraway a peasant went, his heart always lay attached to the land. Lalu’s platoon was ordered to get ready to go to the front. Though they had no idea of where they were to go, they got ready. Their first destination was the Karachi port, from where they would get their orders. While walking through the streets of Karachi, Lalu was surprised to see a huge plate above many godowns with ‘Ralli Brothers, Exporters and Importers’ written on it. He remembered sacks with the same name tag being brought to his village while the merchants came to collect their harvests. He realised how these merchants of the towns had been exploiting the Indian peasant in the villages and living comfortable lives, while the peasants were dying of hunger. The orders soon arrived and they were to go across the black waters to some foreign land. Just as Lalu was about to board the ship, the news of his father’s death

²⁰ Ibid. p. 217

came. It hit him like the strong waves of the ocean. Lalu paused; his mind wavered back to his village, Maya, his mother, his father and his land, the very land he wished to get back to. He regained his composure and boarded the ship on his journey to unknown destinies.

Across the Black Waters

“All of them had joined the army of their own accord, but, as one in every three peasant family had to go and earn a little extra money to tide through the droughts, they really had no choice. They had little hope and less desire. But had anyone any control over his destiny, if one’s life was not one’s own to live? Could anyone possess himself?”²¹

As they approached the foreign land, all the soldiers were excited and lost in dreams and fears of their own. And for Lalu, one of his dreams of going to *Vilayat* was coming true. The land where the *sahibs* came from and people wore coat and led fashionable lives. The land where machines did a lot of work and extreme poverty, as his own, was believed to be a myth. As the coast approached, Lalu wondered about his destiny. “Only to him the village seemed far from here now...”²²

On arrival, they realised that they were in France. They were to put up at a temporary camp until they receive further orders from the front. One common thing that all the soldiers experienced was the uncertainty of the next moment. As Uncle Kirpu said, “The drowning Brahmin will take his followers with him...Therefore where the Sarkar goes, *Hazoor*, we have to follow like good disciples...”²³ As they arrived there the people welcomed them with great fanfare and the Indian soldiers

²¹ Anand, Mulk Raj. *Across the Black Waters*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2007, p. 247.

²² *Ibid.* p. 9

²³ *Ibid.* p. 28

were surprised and very elated at this reception. The people were very kind to them and there seemed to be not much differentiation among people in this part of the world. And Lalu also noticed that the system of untouchability was absent in this country. Since most of the soldiers were formerly peasants, their world had also been in and around the farms and the village. As they travelled in a train from one camp to another, a French soldier happened to travel in the same compartment as Lalu's. And when Khushi Ram, one of the clerks in the army, began talking to the Frenchman, all other soldiers got curious and all they wanted to know was whether he was a peasant or a field worker, whether he owned land and ploughed it with oxen like in India and so on. But the answer for these inquisitive came as a surprise to their minds. This was indeed the beginning of realisation to many peasant-turned-soldiers that the image they had in their minds about the 'civilized' nations were just mere disillusionment. At least, the answer from the Frenchman got the Indian soldiers thinking.

“‘He says that his father was a field worker,’ said Khushi Ram, ‘a mere labourer and owned no land though I can’t understand why the peasants in this country should be so poor. After the revolution, the land was divided up and the peasants who were slaves were given small holdings.’”²⁴

Lalu was still lost in his own world and he felt small in this new world. He remembered his past and his joining of the army. He couldn't believe that he was now in a foreign land and en route to fight a war against the 'fiendish Germans', as that is all he knew about the enemies of the Sarkar. The long fields on side of the railway tracks took him back home until he fell asleep and lost himself to fatigue. The soldiers were jolted back to reality when a stench of smell of blood mixed with iodine hit their noses. As they looked curiously, they noticed a train halted on the platform opposite

²⁴ Ibid. p. 60

with injured soldiers, many missing an arm or a leg. They were all bandaged and the whole area resembled a giant hospital after a massacre. Then the reality of the war sunk into them. Alongside, Lalu began noticing big houses on the verge of farmlands, away from the small houses, and began wondering if this land too had landlords like it was back home.

They reached the front and soon the war had begun for these soldiers. Even in the trenches, the men seemed to remain the peasants they were, as when it rained; they compared it to the rain during harvests as that is the worst thing that could happen to a peasant. When the soldiers were on a shift after days, they camped in a village a little away from the trenches. There, Lalu came to be acquainted to a family of French peasants. Lalu spent days with them as the family had accepted him as a part of them. Though their life was simple, it was peaceful, unlike the life of an Indian peasant. Lalu dreamt of building a farm like the one he had seen during the time he spent with the family. He was even surprised to see that they had machines to milk cows in this land. He asks uncle Kirpu, “Now, tell me, would you prefer us to live the lives of bullocks or would you have your bullocks live like human beings?”²⁵ And later when he writes to his mother back in Nandpur, he mentions about all these methods of building a better farm. He writes about how the peasants in France were better cultivators as they used tractor machines that helped with better and faster ploughing and the usage of manures against pest attacks. The answers for the various reasons of crop failures in India were present in this land. And the farmers in France had big houses. The occupation of farming was no less dignified than any other occupation in this new world. He goes on and on about the cleanliness and the ways of farm-keeping followed by the farmers there. He also asks Gujri to ask Dayal Singh

²⁵ Ibid. p. 161

to feed the cattle on greens, straw and oil seeds as the French did so that, the cow would yield more and better milk. Lalu also studies and points out the reason for this prosperity of the peasants abroad. He says,

“The reason why these people are happier is because they do not borrow money from the moneylenders, but from the Bank at very low interests. When I come back, I shall ask the *Karnel* Sahib to order the bania to give back our mortgages, and to get the landlord to return the lands he has seized from us as a reward for fighting in this war. Saying is one thing, you will say, doing another; but have faith, mother, trust in me.”²⁶

The narrator in the novel explains the migration from farming to the army. They initially join the army as they are the second, third or the fourth sons of the peasant family. The burden of debt drives them to the army in order to pay off at least the interests on the mortgage, which in most cases is land. And their legacy of being Sikhs and their record as being courageous creates a demand for them in the army too. And the other perks that the army offers such as uniform and muftis, etc., too act as an additional bonus along with the respect they get in the society. The pay they get is mostly sent home which ends up with the landlord or the moneylender. And eventually, their pay in one way or the other returns to the Sarkar. Their dreams to clear off debts and go back to their villages with a piece of their own land as grant for serving in the army seemed to be the biggest dream many such soldiers held on to. They wished to serve the Sarkar in order to return to the past they heard from their ancestors; a past where indebtedness didn't push farmers to quit agriculture, and their past where famines didn't lead to peasants turning beggars or taking their lives.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 186

Homecoming: *The World Turned Upside Down*

During the last days of the war, so many things had happened. Many people close to Lalu like Dhanoo and Lachman Singh died in the battle field and Uncle Kirpu attempted suicide due to unknown reasons. And on one night, when their troops were attacking and approaching the German trenches, Lalu was shot in the leg and as he lay immobile amongst other dead or injured bodies, he was taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans.

Five years since the day he had left, he returned to the Lahore Cantonment after serving as a prisoner of war. He felt strange as he returned home. He felt like he had been away for a long time and was in a way oblivious of the changes that had occurred and hoped things were the same. Looking at the fields on either side of the railway track, like he did in France, everything looked calm and composed. And he also happened to overhear the conversations of the ongoing national movement against the British Sarkar. This was not new to him as he had heard such conversations among the prisoners in the war camp as many leaders exiled from India were accepted in Germany and they were ‘conspiring’ against the British, according to what the latter called it. Lalu heard all this hazily and dreamt of the grant of land he would get and his life as a peasant on that land with his mother and brother. On reaching the cantonment he got the shocking news that he was being discharged from the army as he too was believed to have been part of the group trained by the seditionists to revolt against the Sarkar. Since he had served sometime in the prison, where seditious activities were taking place, he too was believed to be one among them and was discharged with no grant of land or award. Lalu stormed out of the office, hurt and disappointed; for all these while he had been loyal to the Sarkar, unlike many soldiers who made use of the opportunity in the prison camps and led

comfortable lives now. And then Lalu began thinking of the words of the ‘seditionists’ again and realised that there might be some truth in it. The seeds of resistance and revolution were sown in his mind.

On reaching Manabad, he realised that a lot of changes had taken place in the old town. It was filled with new industries now and Lalu refers to it as an ‘antheap’²⁷. And then he noticed the beggars on the street which seemed to have increased in plenty. He also remembered seeing so many such beggars, in dirty rags and hunger in their eyes, on the way to his cantonment. As he walked, he gave some money to an old man and on asking him why he was begging, Lalu was shocked to know that he was a peasant who had lost his land and had nowhere to go and nothing else to do. Looking around, Lalu realised that all the people who were beggars now were peasants in the past.

“We are peasants, brother. Take pity on us! We lost our homes because of the drought and we came here and found job in the woollen mills in Bariwal. But the mill has gone on short work... My land doesn’t exist, baba! My land was the ruin of me!”²⁸

The lives of so many peasants had ruined and the ones left were fighting among themselves over land and rights over property.

“But there is a famine on in the land. God’s wrath has fallen on our heads! And the people of the countryside are being forced on the road because they can’t buy seed to sow. Some of them get jobs making roads. But now the Sarkar has even stopped the road-making. Oh, the poor man has only one thing left-and that is to die! But he can’t even die with honour! For there is no

²⁷ Ibid. p. 28

²⁸ Ibid. p. 30

one to perform the last ceremonies on the dead. He is just being forced into the swamps, into the hills and the bazaars. And some live in the shadows of the bridges, some in ditches and on the paths, while we sleep on the board of the shops....There was a fever which took the lucky ones, but God will not take us sinners....”²⁹

Lalu was shocked to hear all this and wondered what had caused such misery to the lives of the peasants. There were issues when he left, but this was beyond his imagination. He wanted to know more but had heard enough for him to digest on the very first day after he had been discharged. He walked to a shop and refreshed himself with a glass of lemon juice.

As he waited to look for a *yekka* to return home, Lalu was surprised to see big lorries parked there ferrying passengers up and down nearby villages. The lorry had a class division according to the comfort of the seats. And to an even better surprise, Gughri was now driving one such lorry and his cousin, Jitu (uncle Harnam Singh’s son) was the cleaner of the lorry. It was a happy reunion of the old friends. Gughri gave him a ‘privileged’ seat and they drove back home. All the people who had contributed to the ruination of his family, from the moneylender to the local police, were all now very polite and kind to him. On reaching home, Gughri revealed to him the second fatal event in his family. Gujri had died waiting for her son to return; upon which Dayal Singh turned a saint and fled to Hardwar. Kesari was sent back home. Their land was auctioned off at the insistence of Chaman Lal and bought by Harbans Singh, adding to his vast estate and Lalu’s home too was sold off to pay the lawyer’s fees and after all the money too ended up with Harbans. Lalu now felt even more separated and detached from his village. Lalu reflected, “So there was a rich life

²⁹ Ibid. p. 31

where there used to be a grave poverty.”³⁰ He had nowhere to go and hence ended up at the residence of Harnam Singh where he was happily welcomed. He too had lost all his land and was now working at the Brick factory. He too had been ruined and even tells Lalu once that he would not mind taking up the work as a farm labourer for he grew up attached to this very earth and now the umbilical cord was cut, once and forever. He also tells Lalu how the policy of the Sarkar had pushed many peasants to the cities who ended up as beggars. As Harnam and Lalu were taking a walk, Harnam says,

“Forty bushels to the acre...And I was harvesting sixty bushels of corn on my solitary acre before the war. And it looked as if I were going to get more money than ever, because prices were rising. But if wheat was getting dearer the seed was becoming more exorbitant. You can trust the banias to buy at the lowest price and sell at the highest. They can pluck grain seated on a camel, and they can steal a camel by going about stooping-they are that cunning! And in the war, when flour became four seers a rupee in the bazaars of Manabad, they had bought grain at forty seers to a rupee and stored it. A spell of dry weather, and the peasants who had hoped to wait for the prices to go up, sold their grain dirt cheap and mortgaged their lands! Who could store cotton and the fire of his hunger together?”³¹

The life in and around the village had become worse in terms of sufferings, but there was a silver lining that brought some hope to Lalu. The villagers too had begun talking about nationalism and began raising their voices against the dual oppression of the landlord and the Sarkar. Lalu realised that this misery of the

³⁰ Ibid. p. 44

³¹ Ibid. p. 62

peasants was caused by the same power that took away the lives of his friends during the war. And the war had created a 'money famine' that pushed the Sarkar to exploit the Indian villages even more. Lalu's cronies had now taken the path of extremism joined now by Santokh Singh, the city-educated son of the *risaldar*, who was now a lawyer and a communist. They had a room in their village to carry on their activities and a hideout in the hills. They planned to throw bombs at Chaman Lal, the moneylender, and by doing so, put an end to the miseries of many peasants.

Harnam Singh, on the other hand was organising *jathas* in order to create awareness among the peasants and mobilize them against the landlords and the government's policies. This had been going on for a while and the number of peasants dispossessed was steadily increasing. Harnam took Lalu to one of the *jathas* and he was surprised to see the response of the peasants there. Lalu, when asked to speak, spoke of his life in the army and the meaninglessness of the war. It was a war for power and domination by the nations that were exploiting the very peasants. Slogans like 'Down with the landlords!', 'Down with the Sarkar' and 'Relief to the peasants' rung in Lalu's ears. The people formed a group and marched to meet the Deputy Commissioner in order to hand over a petition to him about the fatalistic realities of the peasants' life. A poet during the *jatha* recited a poem that concluded like this,

“But brothers, the peasant still have the greatest liberty of all left to them,
the freedom which they are now learning to enjoy, the freedom to starve.”³²

Lalu got back to the room where the new comrades were preparing a feast of chicken curry to celebrate his arrival. There they got to discuss the nexus between the landlord, the moneylender and the Sarkar in exploiting the peasant. As Churanji, their

³² Ibid. p. 52

old friend and the son of the moneylender arrived, a debate started amongst them during which Santokh said to Churanji,

“Those whose hands are rough with corns pushing the plough, but who have to give-up three-fourths of their produce in rent and more in debt, are going to strangle you and sweep aside the cushions which penalize honest works and put a premium on farts!”³³

Lalu was analyzing the whole conversation and speaking less as all this was new to him. He also remembered how Harnam uncle explained to him about how the landlord went about gulping up all the small farms and making the poor peasants quit agriculture and crowd the streets of the cities. Harnam also used to criticize the Sarkar for looting the villages of their resources to support them and lead a comfortable life during the wars. The resources were looted both in terms of material and human resources. Lalu had met a person who had been in Germany along with the ‘seditionists’ in his village. Many of them had now returned to India in order to strengthen the national movement. Prof. Verma, had been travelling across India and writing a book on the reality in India. He had come here to take Lalu to Rajgarh that came under the Oudh region on the recommendation of the Count Kanwar Rampal Singh, a revolutionary landlord who was fighting against his own class and also happened to be in Germany. Prof. Verma explained to Lalu about the conditions of the *ryots* of the Oudh region and the emergence of the *Kisan Sabhas* through which the peasants were beginning to resist and revolutionize. The coming of the war and the famine, together, had caused the eviction and death of many *ryots* in the region that had sowed the seeds of resistance in the tenants of the Oudh region. They discussed the exploitation of the peasants at various levels and in detail about the

³³ Ibid. p. 58

socialist dream. After a long discourse, Lalu agreed to leave with him. Lalu was thus christened a Comrade and his mission was to work among the peasants in the Oudh region who suffered more than the peasants at home in Nandpur. The revolutionary fire in Lalu had been kindled. Around this time, Maya and Lalu had rekindled their romance, and as a widow, it was impossible for her to live with him in their village. Hence, they decided to go to Rajgarh, where he would eventually marry Maya. As he got ready to leave, the words of his uncle stayed afresh in his mind,

“This country is like a lean bullock that has been reduced to the bone by the Angrezi lion, son. Each day the lion awoke and gnawed a chunk of flesh off the bullock’s body and left it weaker but still standing. And then the other beasts of the jungle came, and set to—the local jackals and the foxes took their toll! ... There have been bad times before in this country, but surely no time as bad as the present. It was one of those ages during which all joy and hope seems to have fled and in their place remains only a pain, a disease which you can’t even diagnose by feeling the pulse, a belly-ache for which there does not seem to be a remedy.”³⁴

Lalu’s journey as a revolutionary thus began in Rajgarh. He spent days with the evicted tenants there and experienced the warm blood of one of the tenant farmers as he lay dead from the bullet of the Manager of one of the estates. He actively took up work to set up a Kisan Nagar, a home and farm for the evicted destitute tenant farmers. It was also during this journey that he came to meet Gandhiji and Nehruji. He was much fascinated to meet them and get them to understand the realities of the Indian village and include the peasants in the national movement so that their voices too would be heard. But this seemed to go in vain as the elite leadership of the

³⁴ Ibid. p. 66

national movement seemed to be more of words than action. Lalu and the tenant farmers spent days of suffering when the Count and few other comrades led comfortable lives within their mansion at Rajgarh. The war between the tenants and the State became so intense that the military was called upon to suppress them. Many were shot dead and the others captured. Lalu too was captured and during his days in the jail he came to think upon the words of Comrade Sarshar, a communist who differed with the Count at times. It was only the peasants and the tenants who suffered even now. The Count did help in many ways, but was cut off from the reality; the reality of hunger and sorrows. Lalu spent many days in the jail as their trial was delayed until everyone forgot about it. The novel ends with Lalu preparing a speech that he would like to give to his fellow jail mates in order to stoke the embers of revolution in them. He became more attached to Maya during this interim and regretted not having been a perfect husband as he initially believed as much as that he had failed at bringing about a revolution too. Lalu received a telegram from Maya that they had a boy child and that they were doing fine. This new life not only ignited, but blew with full charge in him, the fire of revolution. By now Lalu's hair had grown long, the way it would have been had he not cut it. Metaphorically, Lalu returned to the very beginning of the circle of life, to the very earth and life he had run away from. Lalu was reborn, and looked at things differently now; better and hopeful.

“We failed because we had not changed, because our habits, ideas, opinions were narrow and contained within the circle of Kisan Nagar, because neither our leaders nor we ourselves knew what all our other brothers were doing—these brothers who have ended up from the four corners of India in the mills and factories, escaping from hunger, pestilence and cold into long hours, dirt

and disease. We followed the shadow and forgot the substance. Come, worthy little people, come, we will now make a real Revolution!”³⁵

³⁵ Ibid. p. 391

Chapter II

The Uttar Pradesh peasantry and Munshi Premchand's *Godan*

A Historical Preview

The subtitle of Premchand's *Godan* is 'A Novel of Peasant India'¹. It is indeed the novel of Hori's travail from being a peasant to an agricultural labourer and then a wage labourer; a transition from working to produce a harvest to a worker building a road. This chapter looks at *Godan* as a novel that represents the peasantry of the Avadh region, presently in Uttar Pradesh and many other parts of the country in reality. It examines the representation of the peasantry and the factors that went into the making of it by applying Marxist literary criticism. Historical texts produced about the same period and society is also read alongside to have a better understanding of the representation of peasantry in this novel.

Uttar Pradesh is located in Northern-Central India and the region was one of the hubs of the national movement as well as the peasant movement. The peasants in this region were being exploited for many years until they exploded in rebellion against the landlords and the colonial administration in Avadh (also known as Oudh in the British tongue) in 1921. The Uttar Pradesh Kisan Sabha was one of the first to be formed, in 1918, in order to mobilize and unite the peasants' in their fight against exploitation. According to M. N. Karna, in his essay, *Studies in Peasant Protests and Agrarian Relations in India*², in Uttar Pradesh, the peasant movements were primarily a reaction against the age-old feudal agrarian structure in which the peasants were

¹ According to the translation of the novel into English by Jai Ratan and P. Lal. Though the literal translation means 'the gift of a cow', which has been used widely by scholars, the subtitle given by the above mentioned translators seem the most appropriate one as *Godan* as a novel is not just about the gift of a cow, but about the life of the Indian peasant, hence, this translation is chosen.

² Karna, M N (ed.). *Peasant and Peasant Protests*. New Delhi: Intellectual Publishing House, 1989. (Print)

subjected to multi-layered oppression. The movement merged with the national struggle for freedom, but maintained its grassroot leadership. The political significance of the movement laid in the fact that the presence of the middle and small peasants were recognized and this led to a mass movement.

Avadh was annexed by the British in the year 1856. This was followed by the First War of Independence in the year 1857. As a response to the uprising, the colonial government created a new class of people in the society called *taluqdars*. They were to be the agents of colonial domination over the people, predominantly the peasants, in this region. These men played the role of landlords in the Avadh region. They began living luxurious lives and in order to make their comfortable ends meet and please the colonial administration, they began imposing huge burdens and exploiting the peasants. The exploitation were carried out at different levels. The *taluqdars* extracted *nazrana* (gift payments), *hathiana* (inappropriate cess) and *rasad*³ (compulsory supplies). Other ways of exploitation were *begar* (forced labour) and *bedhakli* (eviction). And when the *taluqdar* desired to buy a car or elephant for himself, *moturana*, an additional burden was imposed on the peasants. And the government officials who came on tours, once in a while, too had to be pleased with *rasad*⁴. But the worst of all was the power of eviction. The peasant was, is and will always be attached to the land. The fear that he (the peasant) could be removed from the very land he had been tilling for generations was always lurking behind the peasant's mind. It was used as a key tool to keep the peasants under control.

³ “The poor peasant is grist for every mill. If he does not grease the palm of the revenue clerk, he suffers; if he does not humour the Zamindar's men, he suffers. As for the Police Inspector and his constables, they think they are the peasant's son-in-law! Whenever they visit the village, every peasant has to gratify them or the long arm of the law falls heavily on him.” (Premchand: 2010, p. 328)

⁴ “And think of the number of officials who come on tour to the village-*tahsildar*, deputy collector, collector, commissioner.... The peasant gets eggs, fowl, milk, butter for them-or else!” (Premchand: 2010, p. 328)

According to the Mehta Report⁵, the cases of eviction had gone up to 25,593 in the year 1919-20 from 15,655 in 1918-19. This, by itself, reflects the extent of exploitation of the peasants. The *taluqdars* were the newly posted ruling classes in the Avadh region and the British didn't seem to act against them or do anything in favour of the peasants as this served their interests where land and agriculture were essentially the source of shoring up their revenue.

In 1886, the Oudh Rent Bill was proposed in order to improve the conditions of the peasants. By now, the peasants had suffered a lot. According to this proposal, the peasants were to be given seven years lease on land, but they could not have any hereditary rights over the land. This Bill was actually not a solution to the problems of the peasants, but it could have averted the approaching agrarian crisis. The peasants were ready to accept even this because of their difficult situation, but this Bill remained a proposal. This reflected to intentions of the British and the power of the *taluqdars* seemed to have increased and thus the exploitation also increased. This worsened the conditions of the peasants. And the coming of the World War I provided the final blow as the administrators now had begun collecting war taxes from the peasants.

It was in times of such unrest that a Kisan Sabha (1920) was formed by the peasants at Rure in Pratapgarh, presently in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. The reason the peasants chose this village was because this was an under-propriety village and not under the *taluqdars*. The Kisan Sabha played the role of a shelter for the dispossessed peasants. It was formed by two peasants, Jhinguri Singh and Sahdev Singh, who themselves decided to raise their voices against the exploitation and injustice. They

⁵ Kumar, Kapil. *Peasants Betrayed: Essays in India's Colonial History*. New Delhi: Manohar Books, 2010 (Print).

had also been aware of the national movement now having become a mass movement, they were subjected to and desired to link the peasant movement to the national movement. It was also around this time that Shridhar Balwant Jodhpurka, later on known as Baba Ram Chandra, had returned to India (1917). He had gone to Fiji at a very young age and worked in organizing the workers there against the capitalistic exploitation. On receiving a letter from Bal Gangadhar Tilak that India needed him now, he returned. He had been travelling across the country in order to understand the situation on the ground. When he happened to visit Pratapgarh, Jhinguri Singh and Sahdev Singh managed to persuade him to take over the Kisan Sabha already formed, and help them to fight against the exploiters. Thus, the peasant movement in Avadh now had an educated leader who, in course of time, created a revolution.

“Soon Ram Chandra won the admiration of the peasantry which came to look on him as their deliverer. He heard their unending tales of misery and at first contacted the taluqdars and sought their help to bring succour to the afflicted peasantry. They, naturally, were found to be unwilling to do away with their tyrannical practices. Rebuffed by the taluqdars, he now turned to the district authorities to enlist their cooperation in his mission, but nothing tangible emerged. He then made a direct appeal to the peasantry and urged the *kisans* to stand on their own feet. He exhorted them to withhold all kinds of cesses, *nazarana*, *begar*, and pay only the normal rent.”⁶

The peasant movement had thus begun under the leadership of Baba Ram Chandra. He studied the situation well and drafted an eight-fold programme to carry forward

⁶ Ibid. pp. 6-7

the movement against the exploiters and for the upliftment of the peasantry. The eight commandments were the following:⁷

- (1) Payment of rent in advance of the fixed time;
- (2) Reservation of jungle tracts for the grazing of cattle;
- (3) Sinking of wells and digging of tankers;
- (4) Planting of orchards;
- (5) Half area to be sown with grain crops and half with cotton, and opening of three cotton mills, one in each tahsil, to employ people as labourers, spinners and weavers;
- (6) Establishment of seed or grain depots at every three *kos*;
- (7) Acceleration of female education by the itinerant *updeshikas* (teachers); and
- (8) Creation of a union among the *zamindar*, *kisan* and *mazudur* (labourer).

This programme was planned not only for the immediate movement, but also for the future. It was planned in such a manner that the entire living standards of the peasants will change and they could lead better lives in the coming days.

The movement had now taken shape and force. Along with the eight suggestions, he also insisted that the peasants pay only normal rent and that all extra extortions will be refused and declined. The peasants, thereafter, refused to pay illegal cess charged by the exploiters. They refused to cultivate the land directly under the landlords and the land from which a fellow peasant had been evicted. The movement grew in strength as the peasants from lower castes too began to join the others.

⁷ Ibid. p. 7

In the early days, on June 1920, over 500 peasants, under the leadership of Baba Ram Chandra, took the first foot march from Patti to Allahabad in order to meet Mahatma Gandhi and draw him into the movement. By now, even the UP Kisan Sabha began supporting the movement. But this didn't last long as the peasants got fed up with the delaying tactics of the Congress led UP Kisan Sabha. Historian Kapil Kumar, who has studied the peasant movements in Uttar Pradesh extensively, considers this as the dispute between a peasant-led Kisan Sabha versus the bourgeoisie-led Kisan Sabha. Meanwhile in reaction to the peasant movement that was gaining momentum, the colonial administration charged and interned the leaders of the movement under non-bail able charges. They also used physical force against the peasants in the villages. This can be seen as the use of what Louis Althusser calls, Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The protesting peasants, now over 4000 to 5000 in number, did not move away from the vicinity of the court. Thus the prisoners were initially tried in the jail itself and later in the court without anyone knowing. But that did not break the determination of the peasants. They continued their protests until their leaders were released. The fallout of all these events and with an aim to contain the peasant movement, the government then appointed V. N. Mehta, the Deputy Commissioner, to conduct an enquiry into the conditions of the peasants. Mehta, who happened to be a sympathizer of the peasant movement, submitted a report (Mehta Report) that unmasked the tyranny of the *taluqdars*. But the Lieutenant Governor then didn't allow the report to be published in its form and completely.

The more the *taluqdars* and the *zamindars* displayed their power and exploited the peasants, the more was the number of kisan sabhas that came up across Uttar Pradesh and particularly in the Avadh region. "Ram Chandra occupied the stage,

dressed like a prisoner bound with ropes. He described the peasantry as tied like himself with ropes of bondage-bondage to the government, taluqdars and the capitalists.”⁸ On the 20th of December in the same year (1920), the peasant leaders called for a gathering at Ayodhya. This meeting saw an unprecedented crowd of more than 50, 000 peasants who flocked in from all the directions. In this meeting, the peasants decided to implement their earlier resolutions everywhere.

“ . . . they returned (from the Ajudhya conference) more than ever filled with a sense of real and fancied wrongs. They fell to discussing these in local panchayats which have since been formed in every village, for the first time in history they had begun to realize the power of an united peasantry . . . If they stood together, *nazarana*, *begari* and other oppressive taxes would automatically cease. The political education . . . was progressing. They were learning the value of concerted action.”⁹

This huge crowd threatened the *taluqdars*. Soon they too began joining the peasants against the colonial administration. On the 26th of December, 1920, the *zamindars* of Bayara decided to relinquish all *zamindari* dues beyond rent. A very big landlord, Chaudhuri Mohammed Ali, decided to stop eviction, *narzana* and *begar* in his estate. Hence, slowly the rural elite too were yielding to the strength of the peasant movements. In order to capitalize the momentum of the movement, the leaders decided to represent themselves at the Nagpur session of the Indian National Congress in December 1920. This was an initiative to combine the peasant movement with the national movement. But this step didn’t work as expected. “Unfortunately, the Congress, because of the class-interests of its leadership, failed to harness this

⁸ Ibid. p. 17

⁹ Ibid. p. 18

strength for a broad-based, revolutionary transformation.”¹⁰ It was Baba Ram Chandra who had invited and brought Jawaharlal Nehru to the villages of Avadh. He had high hopes in both Nehru and Gandhiji. But the fact that the concerns of the peasants didn't seem to be an important priority for the nationalist leaders and that they were trying to balance the interests of the oppressed and the oppressor on the same plane created disillusionment. But it was a little late now to return to the two divergent paths. On January 7, 1921, there was a clash between the peasants and the British at Munshiganj as a result of which several peasants died. Baba Ram Chandra, who was not present there, was deeply hurt to hear the news. When he tried to return to the peasants, he was detained by various Congressmen at their houses in turns. The government soon passed the Seditious Meeting Act in 1921. Baba Ram Chandra was arrested under this law on the 10th of February, 1921. There was a riot following this and the Congress took control of the situation and the peasant movement thereafter. The policies of the Congress and the absence of Baba Ram Chandra from the scene resulted in the weakening of the movement.

“The day of the announced meeting at Unchahar had come but Ram Chandra was helpless and failed to reach there. The meeting was declared illegal under the Seditious Meetings Act by the Government. In order to minimize attendance at the meeting, trains were diverted to other routes on 15 January and at some places the peasants were forcibly restricted from boarding the trains. The meeting was scheduled to decide on the crucial question of withholding the payment of rent. It would be recalled that the Congress had not considered the issue of non-payment of rent as part of the Non-Cooperation programme. Abdul Bari and Jangilal Dhaurasiya discouraged the

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 10

peasants who had collected at Lucknow from going to Unchahar. Jawaharlal, Madan Mohan Malviya and Gauri Shanker Mishra persuaded the peasants who had already assembled at Unchahar to disperse and return to their homes. The determined peasantry dispersed for want of proper guidance and leadership. The whole episode makes curious reading and forces home the conclusion that the bourgeois nationalist leadership betrayed the peasants and their movement.”¹¹

The peasant movement did rise again by the end of the year. This time it was called the Ekta movement. The peasants decided to pay only the recorded rent amount and not exploitative rents as demanded by the landlords. They also refused to leave the land when they were evicted and refused to do forced labour. But by 1922, repression by the government forces brought about the end of the movement. Let us now look into Premchand’s *Godan* and the representation of the peasant from this larger historical context.

Premchand and the Peasants

Munshi Premchand’s writings saw two phases. In most of his writings, he took the path of idealism. He believed in humanity and awaited and preached solutions to the problems in the society through change of heart in human beings. This reflected in his writings too. Until 1936, Premchand was a strong believer of this trajectory. His novels would suggest remedies to the problems in the society through change of heart of the oppressing class from which the oppressed would attain relief. In other words, Premchand was a Gandhian in this phase. And since Premchand viewed the peasantry as the most oppressed class in the society he lived, since they didn’t have proper organisations as a whole as their interests conflicted with the interests of others, he

¹¹ Ibid. p. 21

took it upon himself to act as the chronicler of the peasant society. He studied, experienced and represented their lives from the village and not sitting in the city. He became one among them while addressing their issues and experiencing the exploitation by the landlords and the capitalists. He absorbed the reality of the double exploitation the peasants were facing from the imperial masters and the native lords. In the words of Sudhir Chandra:

“Premchand as the nationalist political commentator close to the Congress, though never of it, felt (especially in his journalistic writings) that he had to take into account, in suggesting remedies, the possible and the pragmatic which may not always be the just.”¹²

The idealist in Premchand can be read through his 1922 work, *Premashram*, which is a novel on *zamindari* exploitation. The reality of the suffering peasants are depicted in the novel. But towards the end, the protagonist, Premashankar, the foreign-returned landlord gives away the proprietorship over the land to the peasants who cultivate there. In the novel, the narrator supports the abolition of *zamindari*. This co-relates with the ongoing peasant movements in Western Uttar Pradesh. In his novel *Karmabhumi*, the reality of farming as a status symbol and the pride of the farmer are depicted. In this novel, there is a character, Atmanand who seems to represent the peasant leader Baba Ram Chandra. Atmanand is an educated non-*kisan* leader of the peasants. Baba Ram Chandra, who emerged as a peasant leader during the same time has had his impact on the writings of Premchand. Premchand was a close follower and part of the ongoing peasant movements. In his 1919 essay, *Purana zamana, Naya zamana*, he mentions about the abolition of *zamindari* and elimination of

¹² Chandra, Sudhir. *Premchand: A Historiographic View*. Economic and Political Weekly: Vol. 16, No. 15 (April 11, 1981), p. 669.

proprietorship of land. Capitalism should have brought about the proletarianisation of the peasants or what is known as depeasantisation in the social history of Western Europe. But under colonialism, the landlord, the colonial government and the semi-feudal system only brought about depeasantisation and pauperisation without proletarianisation, according to P. C. Joshi. Premchand was very much aware of this reality and lived and wrote from this perspective. “The quality of the writer’s perception of social reality, therefore, depended as much on his direct contact as on his spiritual identification with the colonial peasant.”¹³

But towards the end of his literary life, Premchand’s writings and ideology shifts from idealism to realism. He had witnessed the peasant movements around him and the role of the Kisan sabhas and the Congress in the course of the peasant movements. It might be possible that he realised that no existing movement could alleviate the sufferings and improve the conditions of the peasants in the long run. He lost hope in the ongoing movements to improve the conditions of the peasants. The peasants were in such a condition, due to the change in the agrarian society’s structure imposed by the British (shift from feudalism to pre-capitalism) and other factors like unscrupulous interest rates imposed by the moneylenders, the fickleness of nature (famine, flood, etc.) and human greed (*zamindars* and his agents). In 1933, Premchand himself writes in an editorial in *Jagran*,

“So long as individual ownership of wealth remains, human society cannot become free from burdens. Reduce the working hours of the Labourer, pay compensation of the unemployed, increase the proprietary rights of the peasants and the labourer, reduce the value of currency-such reforms you may

¹³ Joshi, P C. *The sub-altern in Indian literature-Some reflections on Prem Chand and his Godan*. India International Centre Quarterly: Vol. 17, No. 1 (SPRING 1990), p. 76.

carry on as much as you like, but our worn-out wall cannot remain standing with all these repairs.”¹⁴

Premchand’s writing, in a way, hence changed in his last few works. In his short-story *Kafan*, he depicts the utter poverty and loss of self-dignity and significance of the human being. In *Poos ki raat*, the extreme condition of the exploited peasant is represented when the protagonist sleeps away on a winter night when his crops are being destroyed by *neel ghai*.

“...Premchand’s work showed a general shift from romanticisation to confrontation with reality. With the passage of time, there was also a tendency to curb the ‘winged irresponsibility’ of the creative writer and to look for more realistic solutions to the ills of the rural society.”¹⁵

In *Godan*, Premchand’s transition from idealism to realism is reflected to the highest degree. Premchand does not just represent the peasant as an idyllic, romantic part of the society, but reflects within himself and to the reader, the ultimate reality of the peasant. His work can be read as a work of all times. The peasant in *Godan* is the peasant today. Premchand realised that all his expectation of human beings to change and the improvement of the conditions of the peasants were hopeless and that this class would suffer. *Godan*, his final work, thus depicts the reality of the Indian peasant who continues to exist, without living.

“By this time he has abandoned the attempt to provide a solution to the peasant problem within the existing system through a change of heart of the propertied and the power-wielding classes. The focus shifts here from

¹⁴ Sprinker, Micheal. *Marxism and Nationalism: Ideology and Class Struggle in Premchand’s Godan*. Social Text: No. 23 (Autmn-Winter, 1989). Duke University Press, p. 64.

¹⁵ Pandey, Geetanjali. *Premchand and the Peasantry: Constrained Radicalism*. Economic Political and Weekly, Vol.18, No. 26 (June 25. 1983), p. 1149.

enlightened landlord to the peasant awakening to a higher level of consciousness.”¹⁶

Godan represents the post-peasant movement conditions of the Indian peasant, which didn't seem to have undergone many changes. The peasant still lived a life of utter poverty under the landlords, struggling hard to make his ends meet. He still had to go begging to the moneylender, who was a part of the village society, when he needed to buy seeds or marry off his daughter. He was still suffering from the epidemic of indebtedness. He was the oppressed and the downtrodden and continued to remain that. The novel represents the utter starkness of the naked reality of the wretched conditions of the rural poor.

“In his last and most mature novel, *Godan*, Prem Chand's heightened literary sensibility is able to shake off the constraints of the Gandhian social outlook and to capture all the major contradictions of the village reality. Premchand's perceptions in *Godan* encompasses not merely the anti-colonial contradiction (the village versus the town conflict) but more fundamentally the anti-feudal contradiction (the peasant versus the landlord-the moneylender-the trader conflict on one hand and the peasant versus the priest-the bloodsucking government officials-the exacting biradari- the oppressive and divisive caste hierarchy conflict on the other). In *Godan* the focus is simultaneously on the human agents of colonial and feudal oppression as well as on their victims in the vast interior of rural India.”¹⁷

Premchand had undergone a transformation regarding ideology and vision on the society and human civilization towards the end of his life. His literature reflected a

¹⁶ Joshi, P. C. Op. cit., p. 85.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 79

sense of missing tranquillity which seemed to have disappeared in *Godan* as he seemed to have realised the reality he was dodging all through his literary life hitherto. And this self-realization reflects in *Godan* making it as one of the most stark, naked novels representing the reality of the Indian peasant.

***Godan* and the Indian Peasant**

“Here is an unforgettable character who combines in his person the Indian peasant’s tenacious will for survival with his sense of utter hopelessness within the colonial economic order...Hori is the living personification of the peasant in colonial India.”¹⁸

Godan is a novel based on the life of an Indian peasant, Hori. The novel revolves around his life as a peasant and then later as farm labourer. Hori represents not only the condition of the Indian peasant in the 1930s, but also of the peasant of today. This novel also marked the conclusion of Premchand’s transformation from an idealist to a realist. “The total hopelessness of Hori’s situation shows the limits of the system and the futility of all schemes for providing relief to the peasant through any attempts to reform the system.”¹⁹

Godan is set in an Indian village, Belari in the District of Oudh. The area fell under the control of the local *zamindar*, Rai Saheb Amarpal Singh, who lived in Semari, five miles away. The Rai Saheb was very popular and had courted imprisonment during the Satyagraha movement. He also resigned his membership from the Legislative Council. He was a part of the Indian National Congress led national movement and had a liking for Hori. Yet, both he and his agents exploited the peasants and the labourers. In order to make his life comfortable, the peasants

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 75

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 77

were burdened and exploited. His circle of friends included Pandit Onkarnath, the editor of a popular daily *Flash*, Mr. Shyam Behari Tankha, an insurance agent and someone who later plays the role of a political mediator who makes money during the elections by manipulating others and also arranging loans for *zamindars* from banks and moneylenders, Mr. B. Mehta, who taught philosophy at the University, Mr. Khanna, the manager of a bank and also the managing director of a sugar mill and his wife Kamini, Miss Malti, an England-returned doctor and Mirza Khurshed, a businessman who also happened to be a devout Muslim. The novel oscillates between the village, where Hori suffers and struggles to make his ends meet and the city, where the elite from the countryside struggle to achieve their desires and luxuries; for needs were almost absent in their lives. Their issues lay in the struggle for equality in a society where everyone had the space and luxuries to live whereas, Hori struggled for existence.

The novel opens in Hori's home where a family of five is described to be leading a very difficult life. Hori is about to leave for Semari to meet the *zamindar*. His wife Dhania is concerned about his leaving the home without having anything to eat. But he is concerned about reaching Semari on time so that he could meet the *zamindar* before the master sat down for his prayers.

“It's all due to keeping on good terms with the Master that trouble has remained at arm's length from us. Otherwise we would have been wiped out of existence long ago. Out of scores of people in the village can you name one who has not been ejected from his land or been served with attachment orders?”

When your neck is being trampled under the tyrant's heel the safest course is to keep on tickling his feet."²⁰

But Dhaniam was not too happy with what Hori had just said. She wondered why the peasants should worry so much to keep the landlord happy when they pay the rent that is due to him. She didn't understand the power equations that operated in the village society. All she knew well and was concerned about was the state in which her family was living in. She was also aware that it was next to impossible to liquidate the rent imposed by the *zamindar*, no matter how much they tried. Dhaniam had borne six children out of whom only three survived. Three of their sons had died at infancy due to lack of proper medical care. Now, the family of five included Gobar, Sona and Rupa. Hori soon left to meet the *zamindar*. Poverty showed in his face and the clothes he wore.

"Like every householder, Hori for a long time had been cherishing this desire for a cow. It was the brightest dream of his life, his greatest ambition. The desire to live comfortably on bank interest, to buy land or to build a palatial house was too lofty to find room in the narrow confines of his poor heart."²¹

It was Hori's dream to own a cow. A cow was believed to bring prosperity to the household. Along with prosperity, it was also a symbol of pride and prestige. And as an additional advantage, it would provide milk in a household where there were children growing up. But even under all this condition of extreme poverty and unfulfilled dreams, Hori remained loyal to the landlord. The simpleton he was, he believed that the Rai Saheb too was a victim of his circumstances. The landlord had to send money to all his relatives who had a share in the estates. Though they led

²⁰ Premchand. *Godan*. Mumbai: Jaico Books, 2010 (Print), p. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 3

comfortable lives in the cities, they desired for a part in this income too. For them, the necessities of earning a livelihood did not exist. He had to live a life which suited his status and live a life of luxury even in the worst of times. He kept himself in good terms with Hori. When he met Hori, he gave his speech of remorse and regret over his exploitation of the peasants. “We are the victims of circumstances, and as long as we are shackled with property we shall not be able to lead a life of dignity.”²² But as he was saying this, a servant informed him that the forced labourers had refused to do work in exchange for an anna for a day and that they demanded food too. The Rai Saheb stormed out in anger in order to teach them a lesson and this sudden change in behaviour reflected his hypocritical nature. While leaving, he told Hori the actual reason he had summoned him. The landlord demanded Rs. 500 from Hori’s village for the ensuing Dusherra festival. The *zamindar* actually needed a sum of Rs. 20,000 in order to entertain his guests and show off his prosperity during the festival. For this, he was squeezing out money from the already dry bones of the peasants. Apart from the inexplicably high rent, exploitation was also through such other levies. But when he returned home, an argument broke out between Hori and his eldest son, Gobar. Gobar was annoyed over the fact that his father had agreed to arrange for the money and that he always goes and cringes before the *zamindar*. And even after all these, there was no end to the fleecing by the agents of the landlord just like every other peasant in the village. Gobar said, “A man who lives in a palace, has a dozen of cars, eats sumptuously and has a finer time than we can ever have, calling himself unhappy!...God creates us all equal. Those who have power oppress the poor and become rich.”²³ This was the beginning of the issues between father and son. Such arguments soon led to Gobar leaving his parents and settling down in the city.

²² Ibid. p. 13

²³ Ibid. p. 16

Gobar's life can be analysed as the illustration of migration from the agrarian semi-feudal society to the pre-Capitalist city society, where he moves from the village, where he would have continued with farming, to the city where he takes up many odd jobs. Though he earns better, the state of life and the conditions of the city worsens his health and his life soon.

Gobar's migration to the City

Gobar moved to the city for the first time when Jhunia was pregnant; she was the widowed daughter of a cowherd from a nearby village. Since they belonged to different castes, he was overcome with fear. They were in love and had decided to marry too, but now Gobar didn't have the courage to marry her without being able to support his own family. But at the same time, he did not want to abandon her. So he left her at the doorsteps of his house and ran away. He watched from a distance and once he knew that his family had accepted their pregnant, daughter-in-law to be, he ran away to the city. He was very ambitious and had a concrete plan set out for his future.

“He had heard somewhere that the wages of a contractor's labourer in the city were six annas a day. If he spent one anna a day on food he could have five, which worked out to ten rupees a month or about Rs. 120 in one year. If he returned home with Rs. 120 no one would dare belittle him... If he kept on earning at this rate the family need no longer be poor.”²⁴

He decided to spend the nights in a *dharmasala* or on the roadside or some corner his employer would provide him. He also decided on his menu for the coming days and had it all set in his mind. He was now on his way to Lucknow. He came to encounter

²⁴ Ibid. p. 115

another disturbing truth on this journey. One morning when he woke up, he felt very hungry. He tried to suppress his hunger with the help of some wild berries that grew on the side of the road. Suddenly he smelt the scent of *gur*²⁵ from a nearby village. He walked towards the village in order to drink some water from the well. There they offered him some *gur* and water. That is when the villagers told him about the sugar factory that was soon going to be set-up in the village. The factory had agreed to pay for the entire crop in advance and take it when the crop is before harvested. And since the price of *gur* and sugar would be the same, the market for *gur* was to automatically crash. Hence, the first impact of Capitalism on agriculture and the village economy is reflected in the novel through the setting-up of the sugar factories across the villages.

Gobar resumed his journey to Lucknow. He was surprised, on reaching, there to find about four to five hundred men looking for work. They had come from all the villages around Lucknow. There were masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, basically artisans and many who had left agriculture and decided to work as wage labourers in the cities. The transition from feudalism to Capitalism was not completely achieved in India. The nation didn't witness an adequate growth in the industrial sector according to the diminishing condition of the agrarian and artisan sector of the Indian villages. Hence, so many such people were left jobless and had moved to the cities in search of livelihood. Soon Mirza Khurshed arrives there and he employed many of these villagers. Gobar was one among them. Mirza was soon impressed with Gobar's work and gave him space at his workplace to sleep. Mirza conducted a *kabaddi* match for the old generation from the villages and earned both money and provided entertainment for the city folk. Gobar soon started earning and he set up a small shack on the pavement that sold tea during the winters and iced *sherbet* during the summer

²⁵ *Gur* is the natural form of sugar made in villages from sugarcane syrup. It is brown in colour and has more nutritional values than the processed sugar available in packets these days.

months. He soon became a city-dweller in all senses of the term. He stopped working for Mirza Khurshed soon and also set-up his home in a small hut on the pavement where many such migrants lived in the city.

Hori and the Village

On the way to Semari to meet the landlord, Hori had bumped into Bhola, the cowherd. He was returning from the market after buying a cow. Bhola, a widower himself was on the lookout for a wife. He was desperately looking for a life partner to redeem him from his solitude. Hori capitalized on this and promised Bhola of finding him a suitable wife. Bhola, on this assurance, promised Hori to send the cow over to Hori's place soon. Hori and his family were really excited about this as their dreams of owning a cow was about to come true. The cow soon entered the family and Hori's cow had become the talk of the town. This soon made the moneylenders and the agents of the landlord jealous as Hori owed them money; moreover they couldn't be happy with the well being of any villager. But this happiness was short lived as Hori's brother, Heera poisoned the cow as he was jealous of his brother's fortune. The family had fallen apart and the three brothers lived separately since their father had died. The two brothers thought that Hori had eaten into their shares from the land that was inherited by the brothers. After Heera had poisoned the cow, he fled from the village and in order to hush up the case arise and not make a legal issue out of it, Hori paid the inspector rupees thirty; out of which the revenue clerk, Pateshwari and Nokhey Ram, the police officer got their respective shares. And for Jhenguri Singh, another loan was imposed on Hori, and Hori was indebted even more after the death of the cow. For Hori it was a matter of prestige, as the oldest of the brothers in the family, he could not let his destitute sister-in-law pay for a mistake his brother had committed.

Hence, the event left Hori deeper in debt and with a broken heart due to the loss of the cow and his brother who had run away from the village.

The nexus between the landlord, his agents, the State and the moneylenders are clearly reflected in the novel. The landlord squeezes his agents who in turn exploit the peasants. The agents have their own lives to take care of and hence exploit the peasants even more. The villagers who have no other way to continue as farmers turn to the moneylenders who are mostly from their own village. The moneylender gives money at unscrupulous rates, keeping the peasants indebted to them forever. And the moneylender, sometimes also lends money to the landlord at times of emergency. Hence, the ones in power form a nexus in suppressing the peasants at multiple levels. Hori once narrates his woes to Bhola. He said that his grain was weighed and taken away even before it reached his barn. The *zamindar* took away his share and the remaining was distributed among the moneylenders.

“The Zamindar apart, I’ve three money-lenders to cope with. I’ve not been able to pay their interest. Half the rent of the Zamindar’s remains unpaid. I had again to borrow from the money-lender.”²⁶

Most of the peasants were in similar situation. Indebtedness had become a part of the life of every Indian peasant. “A loan was like an unwelcome guest, who, once in the house, dug himself into a permanent fixture.”²⁷ Hori himself owed money to all the moneylenders in the village. The debt never seemed to close but only grew with days. He had taken a loan of sixty rupees from Mangru, in order to buy a bullock, five years ago. It had grown to a hefty amount of Rs. 300 now. He owed money to every such being in the village that had a little money to spare. At such times, anyone who had a

²⁶ Ibid. p. 19

²⁷ Ibid. p. 85

little money to spare became a moneylender. But no matter how hard Hori tried and how worse his life became, the debts never seem to reduce. It had formed itself as an albatross around his neck. And this was the reality of every Indian peasant. “Indebtedness is indeed the principal socio-economic fact of village life as a whole, and the decisive material determinant of Hori’s life in particular.”²⁸ Along with all these burdens, Hori was now worried about the money that Rai Saheb had asked him to raise for the Dusherra celebrations. He managed to raise an amount of Rs. 5 by selling off the bamboo shoots that grew in his backyard. The festival started and the landlord was not very happy that he didn’t get as much as he had demanded. But he also didn’t create a fuss over it as he didn’t want any issues when his guests arrived. Hori was to play the part of a gardener in a play to be acted out as part of the festival. This made Hori glow with pride as not many villagers like him had this opportunity. But it was unfortunate that he didn’t know that this was how institutions exercised their power over others.

The Bourgeois-nationalist leaders

The Rai Saheb and his friends got busy with the celebrations. They debated at length on nationalism, business and other political affairs. Premchand also draws a contrast between the concerns and lives of the rural, oppressed villager and the rich, elite and urban city folk. The author also uses these characters, close to the national movement, in order to give the reader an understanding of the elite-nationalists nexus. Rai Saheb and his association with the national movement also confirm the zamindar-nationalists nexus that played an important role in the dynamics of the peasant movement in Uttar Pradesh. Mr. Mehta, the University teacher in the novel, gets into a debate with the

²⁸ Sprinker, Micheal. Op. cit., p. 64

landlord on his exploiting the peasants. Mr. Mehta believed that if the *zamindar* believed in the welfare of the peasant, as he argued, he must give the peasant a fair deal. He also believed that tenancy rights must be given to the peasants and that forced labour must be abolished. Mr. Mehta is a believer in the socialist form of society and he concludes by saying that he had no sympathy for people who preached communism and led the lives of princes. Mr. Tankha, the insurance agent, soon comes to the defence of Amarpal Singh. Amarpal meanwhile blames his present conditions on his forefathers and the prevailing semi-feudal system.

“I also live and die with them; they couldn’t have a greater well wisher than me. I live by imposing fines so what? I throw parties to officials, give donations to the government, meet the expenses of my relatives (whose number, incidentally, is legion). Does money grow in my house? Every bit of it has to come from the tenants. If you think Zamindars are a happy lot, then you are living in a fool’s paradise. If we led a straight life, without quile or treachery, we wouldn’t last a day. Not that we are poisonous scorpions out to sting everyone; nor does it please us to oppress the poor. But we must uphold the dignity and tradition of our line.”²⁹

The debate soon shifts to the institutions in the society and then to their personal lives and so on. The fate of the suffering peasants was just another topic of discourse for them. They soon gathered for dinner. At the dinner-table they decide to play a bet. The topic came up when everyone was drinking and they remembered Pandit Onkarnath, the editor, who was not at the table. He was a pure vegetarian and a tea-totaller. Malti, the doctor, places a bet for rupees thousand that she would make him drink. When everyone had pooled in the money, there was a shortage of rupees three

²⁹ Premchand, Munshi. Op.cit., pp. 156-57.

hundred. The Rai Saheb didn't hesitate for a moment in making up for the shortage of money. The money that had come from the sweat and blood of the suffering peasant was just thrown into a silly bet without a thought.

The next day, they go out on a hunting party. Premchand takes his liberty here to criticize the nationalists who were a part of the national movement at the apparent level, but did not suffer much in their personal lives. They led comfortable lives and went about bringing progress in a society which was already progressed. The Rai Saheb had been to prison during the Satyagraha movement, but he was released soon and continued leading a comfortable life. In fact, towards the end of the novel, when he acquires more property through a legal suit against his own relatives and becomes a Home Member in the council, he regrets having been a part of the national movement.

“What a mistake to have got entangled in the National Movement. That only brought him a bad name, eroded his finances, landed him in jail and disgraced him in the eyes of the officials.”³⁰

Miss Malti had also established a Women's League in order to discuss the empowerment of women. But the real question lies in the fact as to whether if Dhania could feel empowered through this League? The answer is of course, no.

Back in the village, after the festival, the situation was worsening. After a long wait for the monsoons, when it finally arrived, the peasants got ready to till the fields with their ploughs. But before they could set foot on the fields, the bailiff declared that no one could till until they paid their rent. The peasants were shocked as this meant they could not get the tilling done for the autumn crop, and this implied they

³⁰ Ibid. p. 296

would not only be left indebted more, but also have nothing to sustain them. In an act of desperation, they rushed to the moneylenders in the village. Hence, the vicious nexus of the oppressor once again took advantage of the peasants. For Hori, this had happened at the same time of the cow's death. Hence, two calamities had struck Hori back-to-back pushing him deeper into the well of indebtedness. Hori was left hopeless. "He could not recall a single day in his life when, after paying land revenue and the interest on his debts, he was left with any money worth the name."³¹

The coming of Jhunia

After Gobar left, Jhunia had become part of Hori's family. Dhania did not have the heart to send her pregnant to-be daughter-in-law out and leave her to the mercy of her father and brothers who were determined to kill her. Datadin, the priest, soon arrived at Hori's house to warn him against keeping Jhunia at home. He explained how the village would turn against him for accepting a widowed girl from another community. But Dhania argued with the priest and also reminded Hori that Datadin's son, Matadin, himself had kept a mistress from the cobbler community. If that would not defile his *dharma* as a *Brahmin*, then Jhunia's entry into their house wouldn't do too. One by one, all the agents of oppression from Pateshwari to Nokhey Ram too warned Hori against this. But Dhania stood her ground and had already accepted Jhunia as her daughter-in-law. But the irony was that all these people who were creating a fuss over the issue were the actual ones living in all ways of defilement of *dharma*. Datadin himself had once made advances towards Jhunia and retreated only when she threatened him. They told the others that if Jhunia was spared then all the widows in the society would soon start following her ways. Thakur Jhenguri Singh said,

³¹ Ibid. p. 100

“A girl like Jhunia should have her head severed...By giving her asylum Hori has poisoned the well-springs of the society. If he stays here our village will be polluted. We should inform the Rai Saheb about this. We should forewarn him that with this ill wind blowing in the village, no person’s honour is safe.”³²

But this matter was not referred to the landlord as discussed. The exploiters in the village decided to make use of this opportunity to make some money for themselves and torture Hori even more for not listening to them. They decided that the bailiff, Nokhey Ram, would file a suit against Hori for the attachment of his land and also impose a fine of Rs. 100 on him. When he doesn’t have anyone to help him, he would have to leave the village. But when the others realized that Hori had already paid the land revenue, Nokhey Ram smiled and said that he had not issued any receipts to any of the farmers and hence there was no proof of payment. It was all decided. The Panchayat declared that Hori would have to pay a fine of Rs. 100 in cash and thirty maunds of rice in kind. At the same time, Jhunia too gave birth to her son. Her attachment to the family hence deepened.

The Panchayat was soon called and Hori, to whom self pride was most important as a peasant, agreed to the verdict of the *panches*. Though Dhania had an argument with Hori about this, he had the upper hand. Hence, Hori was forced to part with the whole of his produce. He mortgaged his house for a sum of eighty rupees to Jhenguri Singh in order to pay the fine.

“Here he was, dumping his own grain at another man’s place, like a person digging his own grave. He was worried about food for his children. But the fear of the community, like the fear of a ferocious animal, goaded on him. He

³² Ibid. p. 108

could not imagine life outside the fold of the community...Outcasted, he'd just disintegrate."³³

This was the reality of the Indian peasant. His attachment to the land and his pride over the fact that he is a farmer and his attachment to his community meant the most to him.

Later, when the Rai Saheb came to know of all the developments, he burst into a fury. This once again reflected his hypocritical nature characteristic of the *zamindar* and unlike the feudal lord in earlier times. In the age of feudalism, the landlord always protected his subjects for their survival was a necessity to him. But here, the Rai Saheb was angry not because the *panches* took control of the situation and exploited his subject. He was angry because they had stood in his path of adding to his treasury. He shouted to Nokhey Ram,

“What right have the *panches* to stand between me and my tenants? What other income have I except these fines? If the realisations go to the government's coffers and the outstandings are secretly pocketed away by you people, where do I stand?”³⁴

He threatened the bailiff that he would file a suit against all of them and see to it that they were all removed from their posts and that they paid for their acts. This left the exploiters in the village in fear. In the meanwhile, the peasants were all suffering at the hands of mother-nature now. There was a drought and the crops failed. They could not pay the land revenue too this time, pushing them all into more despair. Hori's situation worsened even more as Bhola took his bullocks away in exchange for the cow he had given earlier. Without the bullocks, he was left handicapped. Along with

³³ Ibid. p. 110

³⁴ Ibid. p. 152

all this, he had also taken up cultivating on Heera's land as he could not see his sister-in-law, Punia, suffering all alone. By doing this, he had weakened himself and also his crop was neglected to an extent. But to a relief, at times of utter despair, Punia sent grains and food that was necessary for the family to barely survive. Yet, Hori worked hard and did his most to support his family.

The Sugar Factory as another floor of Exploitation

The Sugar mills soon started functioning and production was to begin in full flow. This acted as another floor for exploitation of the peasants. Though the farmers got advance payments for all their produce at one go up front in cash, it was a trap by the exploiters. Here, the capitalists and the exploiters in the village formed a nexus. But the peasants were lured into this because the offer of ready cash seemed an immediate relief in the lives of many peasants. They had many needs and this cash would serve as solace for them. The real face of the exploiters soon unmasked.

“As soon as the weighing of the cane got under way Jhenguri Singh posted himself at the mill gate. He had every cartman's sugar cane promptly weighed, chit taken to the counter, payment received from the cashier, his own dues deducted and the balance handed over to the cartman.”³⁵

Hori was left with only rupees twenty five on selling his whole produce. And this too was grabbed by Nokhey Ram. Hori was left dazed and robbed. But this was the state of all the peasants in the village. They had worked throughout the season, in the sun, producing the sugarcane, and now all they were left with was either nothing or a few *annas*. Hori returned home and this led to another argument with Dhania. He then declared that he would begin to work as a labourer. He said, “It is no sin to work as a

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 168-69

labourer...When a labourer comes into money he can turn himself into a peasant.”³⁶

Hori now worked for Datadin as a hired hand, no longer a peasant, but just a slave. But unlike a slave in the past, he was free not to work and starve. The transition from peasant to tenant and then to labourer is reflected in Hori’s life. This had become the fate of most peasants. Hori’s health had deteriorated over the years and he was no longer the same old man. One day, as he was working on Datadin’s farm, he collapsed. Datadin had pushed Hori so much that his body could not take anymore. Hori was taken home and put to rest.

Around this time, Gobar decided to return home. Life in the city and his surroundings made him lonely and he decided to go back home, make peace with his parents and bring back Jhunia and his son whom he had not seen to the city. With his bags packed with gifts for everyone in his family and the money he had saved, Gobar began his journey. In fact, he arrived the day his father had collapsed in Datadin’s fields. They were all happy to see him and welcomed him. Soon, Gobar realised the condition of his family. And Gobar also heard of all the sufferings his family had to go through and the injustice that prevailed over them. And when he heard that Hori was now a hired hand, his anger knew no limits. Now he was financially sound and was confident to face and challenge all the oppressors of the village. Many calamities had struck the family at the same time and the helplessness of his father enraged Gobar. He decided to take on them much against his father’s advice. Hori was worried about his prestige and pride in the village but Gobar didn’t listen to him. By now the news of Gobar’s return from the city had spread across the village. First he met Bhola and made peace with him. After talking to him for long and assuring him a job for his son who had gone wayward, Gobar returned home with the bullocks that had been

³⁶ Ibid. p. 171

confiscated by Bhola earlier. He now had the duty of restoring the condition of his family and challenging the oppressors. But Hori once again tried to argue with him. Then Gobar said,

“We had respect from the community. No one ostracised us. Why couldn’t you find a match for me? Because we had no money, that’s why! When your coffers are full, community and ostracism becomes silly. The world slides with those who have money.”³⁷

Gobar who had spent over a year in the city now was aware of legal rights and decided to file a suit against the *panches*. This news soon spread and created a stir in the village. One by one, Gobar visited everyone from Jhenguri to Datadin and let them know that he was now back and they would be made to pay back for the torture they had inflicted upon his family.

Every year, the festival of Holi was celebrated at a meeting ground at Nokhey Ram’s place. He spent a little on this, but this was also a means to hold the villagers oppressed. But this year, Gobar decided to take care of the expenses. He had arranged a much grander and better version of Holi and all the villagers gathered at his celebrations. His attitude towards Datadin and Jhenguri Singh had already enraged them. This added further to the fury of the oppressor-nexus in the village. As part of the celebrations, the villagers also enacted a play in which all these characters were mocked at with the problems in their personal lives. Other forms of exploitation like the fleecing of money and unsurious rates of interest that were levied upon the peasants in order to exploit them were dealt within the play. After the celebrations, the next morning, Datadin came home to ask Hori to return to the fields to sow the sugarcane. Gobar refused and an argument ensued. When Datadin asked Hori to repay

³⁷ Ibid. p. 196

the loan Hori had taken, Gobar agreed and demanded to know the amount. Datadin gave an amount as around rupees 200. This infuriated Gobar and he began calculating the amount to be returned on the basis of the fair interest rate, which was one percent, and this came to about rupees sixty-six. Gobar said that he would pay nothing more than rupees seventy. This not only left Datadin angry but also worried the others who were profiting by exploiting the peasants. If Gobar was allowed to go on like this and argued with such facts, all other villagers would soon do the same and their exploiters would not only lose their source of income, but also be exposed. Back home, father and son had a debate about this. Hori said that he would somehow pay Datadin as he was afraid of the consequences of earning the wrath of a Brahmin. This made Gobar look at his father with contempt.

The moneylenders and other exploiters of the village got together soon and began scheming to handle Gobar and put an end to this beginning of resistance. They decided to file a suit against Hori for arrears of land revenue. Though Hori had paid all his dues, there was no receipt for his payment whatsoever. On the other side, Hori began preparing his own field for the sowing season and the whole family worked together, but in silence. These recent debates had brought a small friction in the family between father and son. And this had also shown on the family. That night Hori was summoned by Nokhey Ram. Soon he found out the reason. They claimed that he had not paid the land revenue for two years. When he returned, Gobar asked him as to why he had paid money without any receipts. Hori said,

“I didn’t think he’d trick me. This is all the result of your doings. You made fun of him: now he is having it out of us. If we have to live in the river, it does

not pay to antagonise the crocodile. He says I owe him seventy rupees including interest. Where am I going to get seventy rupees?”³⁸

Gobar stormed to Nokhey Ram’s residence the next day and threatened him that he would expose to the Rais Saheb of his doings and refused to pay twice. This shook Nokhey Ram a little bit and he assured Gobar that if his father had made payments, the entry would be there and that there might have been a mistake. Gobar was very upset with his father and decided to leave for Lucknow. He told Hori that he would give the seventy rupees he had owed to Datadin and not a paisa more. He also asked him not to take any more loans from anyone. He insisted that Hori began taking receipts for all the payments he made. The argument grew within the family and as an outburst, Gobar decided to leave with Jhunia and his son.

After his return to the city, Gobar was surprised to find that someone else had taken his place on the pavement and he could not run the business anymore. So he took to working in the sugar mill. The village and the city met once again and the mill is the metaphor in the novel. It was the same sugarcane that was brought from the villages that were processed here and turned to refined sugar. Gobar now took to drinking due to the monotonous job and his health deteriorated. He also took to beating Jhunia. Gobar’s condition worsened when his son died of diarrhoea. But life went on and Jhunia began despising Gobar. Even at such a situation, he made bodily demands on her. And she was already pregnant with their next child. When she was ready for delivery, reality sunk into Gobar’s mind. He had become really unwell and she had nursed him. He now began regretting his actions but it was too late for him now as his health had worsened and he had already lost his job in the mill due to the ongoing strike. The strike had happened as the fall out of wage-cuts imposed by the

³⁸ Ibid. p. 207

factories. And since there was abundance of workers available, the capitalists refused to accept the demands of the workers. “The strike continued; but it made little difference to the mill owners: they had engaged new hands at lower wages.”³⁹ Most of these workers were people who had come to the cities after losing their livelihood as peasants from across the region. All these sobered Gobar and he apologised to Jhunia and decided to start afresh. He soon took up a job as a gardener at Miss Malti’s house. She gave him accommodation at her outhouse and took care of his newborn son as her own. Malti supported their family to return to normalcy. Malti by now had changed her view of life and began visiting the villages and treating the poor for free. She along with Mr. Mehta travelled through the villages trying to understand their lives and problems.

Hori and his fate

“The power of this latter (dharma) over the thought and action of the peasantry, is always, most evident in Hori, who judges his misfortunes to be the results of his own moral failing and of the fate decreed him by higher powers.”⁴⁰

The fate of Hori and the Indian peasant is manipulated by others to a large extent. It is a product of the new agrarian structure that was introduced in colonial India and is also connected to the relations of production.

Back in the village, Hori and Dhania were devastated over their son’s behaviour and departure to the town. This was also a time when the government asked the moneylenders to bring down the rate of interest. But the moneylenders didn’t pay much heed to it as they knew that the peasants were dependant on them and that until

³⁹ Ibid. p. 287

⁴⁰ Sprinker, Micheal. Op. cit., p. 67.

and unless the government arranged alternate mechanisms for borrowing money, the moneylenders were the undisputed source of money to the peasants. They decided that even if they agree for lower interests, they would take advances on every payment and make up for their losses.

It was known to everyone in the village that Matadin had an affair with Selia, a girl belonging to the cobbler community. One day, Selia gave away some grain she was threshing to Dulari for she owed some money to her. This grain had belonged to Matadin. In a fit of rage he abused her and beat her up. As a reaction to this, Selia's family and many others from her community rushed to Matadin's house and forced the bone of meat into his mouth and defiled him. This became a big issue as he was a Brahmin. After this incident when her parents were leaving, Selia didn't go with them. She stayed back with Matadin. But now, both Matadin and her own family didn't want her and she was abandoned and rendered a destitute. As expected, Dhania gave her shelter and gave her a little space in her land. She believed that it was not her fault and that she had the duty to protect her. Though Hori was not very happy about this, he had to agree. This further added to Datadin's fury and he began working out ways to make Hori suffer. Datadin manipulated the cost of labour and seeds with shrewdness and snatched away one-third of the crop, instead of half, from Hori's labour.

Another problem had knocked on Hori's door now. He had to marry off Sona as she was already seventeen. He needed a lot of money for this and considered going to Gobar. But Dhania stopped him from this. Then he considered selling his land, but his pride didn't allow him to do so. And around the same time, Hori had managed have a decent harvest of sugarcane. But this time, it was Mangru Sah who decided to take it away as a representative of the mills. Since most of the peasants were indebted

to him, they couldn't resist too. This worsened Hori's situation as Dulari had agreed to give Hori rupees two hundred in exchange for his sugarcane. That money was to be used for the expenses of his daughter's wedding. Now he had neither the money, nor his crop. Hori was walking back home with Dhania. He said in a disappointed state,

“Do you want me to mortgage the land?”

‘And how will you live if you mortgage the land?’

‘I'll become a labourer.’

But both loved the land: on it depended everything. Without land a man was well, a mere labourer.”⁴¹

But luckily, Nohori, the new wife of Bhola who had by then become very close to Nokhey Ram, agreed to take care of the expenses of the wedding for the sake of her own prestige. Though the bridegroom's party agreed on not taking any dowry, Dhania insisted that they arrange a grand welcome for the wedding party as it was a question of their daughter's honour. The marriage went off well, but Hori was once again back to his indebted state.

“Only the god of death can pension off the bullock and the peasant”⁴²

Matadin, though reinstated with the status of a Brahmin after following a lot of rituals and paying a lot of money to many priests, decided to live with Selia. She had by now built herself a small hut near to Hori's and he began living with her. But Hori's state had worsened. He was now physically weak and was barely able to work under the scorching sun. And now that his family had become thinner, there were not much people to help him too.

⁴¹ Premchand, Munshi. Op. cit., p. 257.

⁴² Ibid. p. 282

“Like a beleaguered army, his interests were helplessly marooned on three bighas of land; he starved, worked as a labourer, put up to every kind of ignominy, and somehow succeeded in warding off assaults on his land. Now it appeared he could hold on no longer.”⁴³

At a time like this, Datadin in order to make some money convinced Hori to marry off Rupa to Ram Sewak, a rich man who was only few years younger than Hori himself. This was the biggest of insults Hori could take, but his helplessness forced him to agree to the proposal. Both husband and wife found reasons to justify marrying off their daughter to an old man. Gobar too was invited to the wedding and he came home. Gobar felt severely disappointed looking at his parents’ condition. The house was now on the verge of collapsing and his family was hanging on to what was left. In order to save his land, Hori was forced to marry off his daughter to Ram Sewak. Gobar now decided that he would start supporting his family and that he would never abandon them again. Though his life wasn’t comfortable anymore, he felt it was his duty to take care of his parents who had toiled hard all their lives. But the marriage left Hori even weaker for he considered it a sin. Gobar soon returned to Lucknow.

“...in the village the peasant was imposed upon by so many masters that he could not eke out even a bare existence: he was a slave who constantly starved in spite of backbreaking work. This was not Hori’s tragedy alone. They all suffered. The peasant moved about, worked, wept and put up with oppression without a murmur, as if to suffer was part of his destiny. He had neither hope nor great joy, as if the wellsprings of his life had permanently dried up. He saw no future ahead of him; his sensibility had incurably dulled. Heaps of garbage lay near his door, exuding stench; he neither saw nor was offended.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 324

He ate without relish, like a machine gulping down coal; anything which stuffed his belly was good enough for him. He would turn dishonest for a pice and fight for a handful of grain; his degradation was so terribly complete that he often made no distinction between shame and honour.”⁴⁴

Rupa had adopted herself to her new home. Ram Sewak treated her well and having lived under very hard circumstances, she adjusted herself well and was happy to be living in such luxury. She also decided that the next time she would go home, she would take a cow. Ram Sewak had a herd of cows and it didn't matter to him if she had taken one home. And now that Mangal, Gobar's son was living with Hori and Dhania, they too felt the necessity for a cow. In order to fulfil this desire and keep the family going, Hori took up work as a casual labourer under a contractor who had come to the village to construct a road. He worked as a labourer digging gravel. This new work in the heat and sun took out the life left in him. After long hours of work, he returned home half-dead. Hori had also decided to pay back the amount he had taken from Ram Sewak during the wedding in order to clear his conscience. And he also didn't want to put the entire burden on Gobar who was to return soon. Day after day, Hori was becoming weaker. One day, Hori felt a fire burning within him. He tried to resist the burning, but the spreading fire soon engulfed him. Dhania, who had witnessed death before, witnessed it again, as Hori lay in her lap, mumbling. They had neither any savings nor a cow. Dhania took the twenty *annas* she had earned through selling yarn and placed it in Datadin's hand as the godan and asked him to perform Hori's final rites. She too collapsed and sank on the ground.

Hori had gone from a peasant and tenant to an agricultural labourer and then a casual labourer, sunken in debt and he sunk in his fate. He lived a life of misery and

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 330

this very misery took his life. Hori here represents the Indian peasant. Hori died not of any disease, but of economic and social oppression. And the social exploitation continued even after his death.

“The death of Hori symbolises the total collapse of the peasant’s dream of Utopia and of the path of submissiveness and compromise...The death of the peasant of the old type, in other words, symbolic of the death of the old society which could not be reformed from within.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Joshi, P C. Op. cit., p. 86.

Chapter III

The Tebhaga Movement of Bengal and *Harvest Song*

History of the Agrarian society in Bengal: A Brief Outline

The Bengal region had seen agrarian unrests since the nineteenth century like the Indigo Revolt (1859-60) and the Pabna Revolt (1873), where the peasants and cultivators resisted oppression by the Company's officers and planters. This chapter will closely examine the peasant struggles in Bengal during the latter half of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s that led to the Tebhaga movement. Sabitri Roy's *Harvest Song* (2005), which is set on the Tebhaga movement, will be closely read along with other texts of history in order to have a complete understanding of the Bengal peasantry of the same period. The alliance between the peasants and the Communist party too is looked into in detail in this context.

Act X of 1859 had contributed to an agrarian unrest then as it put an end to the tenants' occupancy rights; according to the Act, the tenants could be evicted at the will of the landlord. There was a relief when the Bengal Tenancy Act (1885) was introduced as it asserted the occupancy rights and protected against enhanced rents. But all these movements were limited to specific regions and were short-lived ones with mostly singular objectives. As mentioned earlier in the introduction of this study, by the 1930s the nature of the peasant movements began to change as the peasantry began organizing themselves and developed into a platform of resistance. The agrarian unrest in Bengal had begun well in the 1930s but the coming of the World War II put a stop to it. With the war coming to an end, the movements began regaining momentum and revived, and now the effects of the war too triggered protests. The Tebhaga movement was one such movement that reached its height in

1946. It is really difficult to limit peasant movements into years as they are a process. The Tebhaga movement thus was basically a movement of the sharecroppers demanding two-thirds as their share of the produce instead of just half. It was the sharecropper who had to bear the entire cost of cultivation, having no rights on the land and yet he had to give up half the produce to the landlord. And alongside, they also demanded that their produce would be stored in their own godowns and not in the ones of the *jotedars*. The Tebhaga movement, thus, was a movement of the *bargadars* against the *jotedars*. The political parties of the time had a significant role to play in the development of the Tebhaga movement. While the Indian National Congress tried to maintain a neutral stand by not taking either side, the Muslim League tried introducing the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill in 1947 which misfired as it didn't mean any relief to the sharecroppers. The Congress' neutral stand was guided by its calculation to retain the support of both the peasants and the *bhadraloks*, who owned most of these lands, which it considered necessary. But finally, the Congress had to move towards the peasants demands. This vacuum that the major political players had created gave space for the emergence of the Left in Bengal. The Communist Party of India played an important role in mobilizing the peasants and building the organization of the peasant movements. The Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha had a significant role in the Tebhaga movement.

“In Bengal, though attempts at peasant mobilization to resist the atrocities of landlords took place from the late 19th century, the definite and organized way to do it took a clear shape after the CPI started to take the lead in organizing

the peasants through the formation of BPKS (Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha) in 1936.”¹

A major difficulty for the Communist Party was the mobilization of all the peasants in a united front. The unity among peasants was necessary in order to protect the interests of the tenants but this was not possible as the peasants were not a homogenous category. The peasant society in Bengal then, can be classified into rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, sharecroppers and then agricultural labourers. The last two often merged into one social class and formed the backbone of most peasant movements. Another issue faced by the leaders of peasant movements in Bengal was the task of achieving the peasant-worker alliance. This however did not materialize as much as elsewhere in the world. But in some regions of Bengal, this did work. In the case of Bengal, Asok Majumdar, after studying various other modes of peasant classification, has classified the peasants in his book, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946-1950* as follows:

1. *Zamindar*
2. *Jotedar*
3. Rich peasant
4. Middle peasant
5. Poor peasant
6. *Bargadar* (sharecropper)
7. *Khetmazumdar* (agriculture labourer)

The agrarian society in Bengal was mainly based on the ownership of land by individual peasants in the older times. But this changed with the coming of the British

¹ Majumdar, Asok. *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946-1950*. Delhi: Aakar Books, 2011, p. 79.

as the colonial power found it necessary to introduce a new system of land management for their own benefits. Hence, the Permanent Revenue Settlement was introduced in 1793. According to this Act, land became a commodity and most cultivators lost the very land they were tilling. A new class of people, who didn't have much to do with agriculture and also were loyal to the British, became the landlords with the British as their superiors and an obligation to pay fixed rents to the government. By this, the British government had a steady source of income and also established their base as a colonial power. Yet another benefit from this was that the British could also establish a source of steady input of raw materials for their industrial growth in the metropolis. The agrarian society had now passed over feudalism and entered a pre-capitalist stage. The peasants were now reduced to the state of semi-serfs. And the proprietary rights on land went to the *zamindars*. The *zamindars* were now at so much freedom and began collecting rents as they pleased alongside the tax the peasants had to pay. These new *zamindars* were not much in touch with their land and hence, overtime, this gap between the *zamindari* and the tiller caused the birth of a new category called the *jotedars*. They were a landed class who took the land from *zamindars* on lease and sublet them to sharecroppers. Hence, along with the *jotedars*, came the *bargadars* too. The *jotedars* did not cultivate on their land but employed other people to do so. The *jotedars* were actually the *ryots* working as middlemen between the *zamindars* and under-*ryots*. The areas that witnessed the rise of the *jotedar* class were also the ones where the Tebhaga movement was very strong and intense. The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1938 removed the restriction on the right to transfer of land to non-cultivating classes which made the tiller vulnerable to eviction. This change in the agrarian structure alongside the Great Depression (1929-33) and the famine of 1943 worsened the situation of the

peasants. “These middlemen played havoc with Bengal’s agrarian economy by increasing indebtedness, subinfeudation and corollary to it land alienation through ceaseless exploitation.”² Often, the social groups belonging to the lower strata of the peasantry, such as the poor peasant, sharecropper and the agricultural labourer formed as one class as they were the ones who were most affected by these times. And the proportion of this category also increased as the pre-capitalist system also had an adverse effect upon the artisans who also turned to agriculture as wage labourers. Most small or poor peasants were also turned into *bargadars* in this process.

“The Flood Commission report had noted that most of the peasants, i.e. 57 percent had less than three acres of land. According to Azizul Haque, families having less than three acres of land could not survive on its production independently. So 57 percent of the peasants had to sell off their land and gradually moved down the economic ladder to become bargadars or agricultural labourers after the 1943 famine.”³

Most of these peasants lost their land to the *jotedars*. The formations of the bargadars were in particular in the regions of Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda and Midnapur which also happened to be the heart of the Tebhaga movement in 1946-47.

The Tebhaga Movement

“In September 1946 the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha gave a call for Tebhaga struggle (a demand for two-thirds share of the crop for the sharecroppers-commonly known as bargadars or adhiars-instead of the prevailing arrangement of half or even less) for implementing the Flood

² Ibid. p. 40

³ Ibid. p.53

Commission recommendation. The main slogan was *Nij Kholane Dhan Tolo* (stack paddy in your own threshing-floor) and *Tebhaga Chai* (we want tebhaga).”⁴

One of the major issues faced by the sharecroppers was that of eviction. If the *jotedars* had any issue with the *bargadars*, they would easily evict the downtrodden from the land they had been tilling for years. And many other poor peasants were pushed into being *bargadars* by dispossession of their land through unethical and illegal means. And the coming of the War followed by the famine worsened the conditions of the peasant even more.

After the passing of the Bengal Tenancy Act, Fazlul Haque appointed a commission to enquire about the conditions of the peasant. In 1940, the Commission recommended that the *bargadars* must be regarded as tenants and the share of crop to be given to the landlord must be made one-third from a half.

“...the barge system overrides the principle that the tiller of the soil should have security and protection from rackrenting. No one denies that half the produce is an excessive rent. Further the balance of opinion in all countries is that this system of cultivation is not economic and therefore not in the interest of the community as a whole. The cultivator only gets the benefit of half the value of any increase in the field, which is the reward of his own labour or enterprise. If the crop is even a partial failure, he does not earn the cost of cultivation. Our recommendation is...to treat as tenant bargadars who supply

⁴ Ghosh, Utpal. *The Communist Party of India and India's Freedom Struggle: 1937-1947*. Calcutta: Pearl Publishers, 1996, Pp. 180-81.

the plough, cattle and agricultural implements...we also recommend that the share of the crop legally recoverable from their share be 1/3 instead of half.”⁵

The Commission’s recommendation had a very severe impact on the developing agrarian crisis. It was based on this recommendation that the battle cry for the Tebhaga movement had begun to take shape. Though Bengal had seen many peasant uprisings in the past, the Tebhaga movement was the first ever organized peasant movement with definite demands and a political ideology.

Harvest Song is a novel that was originally written in Bengali as *Paka Dhaner Gan* in three parts in 1956, 1957 and 1958. It was translated and published in English in 2005 by Chandrima Bhattacharya and Adrita Mukherjee. The novel is set in the latter half of the 1930s and 40s. It revolves around the events that led to the Tebhaga movement in 1946. This chapter attempts to locate this novel in the context of this agrarian crisis and movement. But before that, it will attempt to locate the ideology of the author, Sabitri Roy as the times in which she lived and the society around her would have had a definite impact on her which would then reflect in her writings.

Sabitri Roy’s writings cuts across the lands of Bengal from towns and cities to the hills and the villages. She wrote on various realities that every being encounters in the course of life, her realities being the rise of revolutionary terrorism since the 1920s, the anti-colonial movement, communal violence, partition and then what followed the partition. But above all this, she wrote on the peasant and working class struggles led by the Communist Party of India. She renders the events in history in the form of fiction, sketching day-to-day people around her as the characters in her novel. The juxtaposition of the personal and the political runs as a thread through the novel.

⁵ Majumdar, Asok. Op. cit., Pp. 48-49 (from Report of Land Revenue Commission, Vol. I, 1940).

It is her personal rendering of the historical events Bengal went through during the 1930s and 1940s leading to the Tebhaga movement. Tanika Sarkar writes the following in the foreword to the novel on Roy:

“Roy had a curious, intimate and difficult relationship with the Party. She was deeply committed to all the struggles it initiated, she admired and valued communists as the most significant people who appeared on her literary horizon. And yet she distanced herself from its authoritarianism and its absolute certainties, its instrumentalist and strategic use of human beings, its formulaic and inflexible laws that reduced people to agents of historical process. At the same time-and here lies the greatness of her novels-just as she critically wrote about this somewhat inhuman tendencies as well as the more banal frailties like factional squabbles, hero worship and blind reliance on commands from the Soviet Union, she also recorded the non-extinguishable humanity, the deep, unflinching commitment to the value of all human lives that the same communists lived out in their daily lives, even as the followed Party dictates.”⁶

Roy grew up in times of a lot of political churning. She was in school during the Civil Disobedience movement led by Gandhiji. It is also found that her family had close links with the revolutionary fighters and many of her family members later joined Subhas Chandra Bose during the war against British imperialism with Japanese aid. She married a communist. Hence, having witnessed and experienced all this as she grew up, she had been exposed to the various shades of Left politics and had the critical thinking to decide which path she wanted to travel; and she found communism

⁶ Roy, Sabitri. *Harvest Song*. Kolkata: Stree, 2005, p.vi.

close to her heart. According to Roy, it was political thinking and choices that represented the very essence of life. She suffered from acute ill health all her life which restricted her mostly to her home. Her reality is reflected in the novel at various instances and mainly through the character of Bhadra. Roy has cut across themes and landscapes and written this novel surrounding the events that lead to the Tebhaga movement. The novel oscillates between the rural and urban Bengal, where different kinds of people are forced into different struggles and on how they come to terms with the harsh realities under the colonial regime. This chapter will move on to a close reading of the text alongside the history of that period by conducting a parallel reading.

The 1930s was a period of unrest and the era of the beginning of many peasant movements. The novel begins with the image of the protagonist, Partha cycling through the cold night in a hurry. It had been long since he visited his own home. Partha was born into a peasant family and grew up in the village, by the fields. He had been good in studies and hence secured a scholarship to go further with his graduation. It was during this period of 'exile' that he came to meet a few Communist leaders who propagated ideas of equality and nationalism. He became one of them and plunged himself into struggles to alleviate and improve the conditions of the peasants and mobilized the peasants against the atrocities of the landlords and their cronies. Through the novel, Partha travels across Bengal, talking to the peasants and mobilizing them against their exploitation. The novel cuts across the village life and the life in the city and how life is perceived and dealt with by different people in different places and circumstances.

The Tebhaga movement, in the novel, is the culmination of many minor and major unrests in the society in response to oppression. In the beginning of the novel,

there is a scene where Jagai Banarjee, the surveyor, is measuring up a plot of field. It had belonged to Mafi's Ma and was now being acquired to the growing asset of the landlord. When the landlord's *nayeb* came with the summons, Mafi's Ma was shocked to know that her late husband had borrowed two thousand rupees from the landlord and now she had to part with the small piece of land she owned and which was also her bare means of survival and existence. But she was helpless as the landlord's word was law. She was left devastated. But immediately after this, something affecting the entire village happened. As the surveyor and his men were measuring up the plot, everyone gathered, heard the sound of drumbeat from the village and waited for the official proclamation. It was announced that no one could use the road to Mansadanga, the only way for the villagers to access to the market and the outside world, without paying toll. On hearing this, the surveyor proclaimed proudly that this would be the consequence of playing around with the landlord. This was followed by an argument between Ali, a villager who was already fuming at the illegal confiscation of Mafi's Ma's land, and the surveyor. Ali protested that the road would always be half-flooded during the monsoons and that it had not been repaired for two years and that it was unjust on the landlord's part to place a toll on the villagers to use the road. Ali demanded that the villagers only pay the toll once the bridge is repaired. Back in the village, Ali and Lakshman (Partha's brother-in-law) asked the fellow villagers not to pay the toll as it was mere exploitation. This protest left Ali's house almost destroyed few days later. Someone had set fire to his house under the cover of the dark. The villagers did their best to save Ali's house and they did manage to save it to an extent, but by then, Mafi's Ma's thatched house that stood next to Ali's was reduced to ashes. Though everyone knew who the culprit was, they had to keep silent. Ali consoled Mafi's Ma and took her to live with him and all he

said was the following, “We’ll build it again, every time it burns.”⁷ Ali, Lakshman and Partha had grown up together. They shared ideas and revolutionary thoughts and were different from the older generations in the village. They play an important role in the mobilization of peasants against the landlords and the colonial regime throughout the novel.

The condition of the peasants was already very bad and the further exploitation added to their miseries. But there was one problem that persisted among the villagers. There were continuous debates between the older and younger generations. The older generation of peasants gave in to the exploitation of the landlord and his men and considered it their fate whereas the younger generation constantly raised their voices against exploitation. For instance, in the very beginning of the novel, when a group of young revolutionaries who belonged to the villages had once robbed the landlord’s office, it were the peasants in the village who had caught them and handed them over to the police. They feared they would suffer the consequences of the robbery in the hands of the landlord. In fact, it is also true as once the landlord loses his money, he would further burden the peasants to regain his losses. In another instance, in a place called Paharpur, which would be introduced and discussed in detail later in this chapter, there is a debate that follows between brothers Sarathi and Sankhaman about the long period such a society has existed and whether it could be changed in a day. To many peasants, changes such as socialism sounded as a dream and they only agreed with it half-heartedly.

⁷ Ibid. p. 14

“The men listened raptly to a tale of a strange land where dreams of co-operative farms come true. It was their own story that they heard from Partha. Words bearing hope came floating through the darkness...”⁸

The conflict, back home, following the burning of Ali’s house and the decision to toll the road to Mansadanga had worsened with the peasants and the villagers going on protest. The landlord sent his men again in order to convey to the villagers that if they do not pay the toll, they would have to face prosecution. And once they didn’t pay, the landlord, in order to suppress them, took the help of the police. This is the first instance of what Louis Althusser termed Repressive State Apparatus (RSA).⁹

“Coming to the fields one morning, the farmers saw that a tent had been put up by the riverside. There were about 50 policemen, including the daroga, milling about the camp. Soon the daroga and some of the men began marching through the fields towards Mansadanga. The farmers watched in fear. One told Lakshman who left immediately for home. On his way he found boys running about everywhere; the police had entered their houses and were beating up people.”¹⁰

As the fallout of these events, Sudam, Partha’s father was beaten to pulp and Lakshman along with few others were taken into police custody. Soon Section 144 was imposed in the area. This can be looked at as an example of Louis Althusser’s

⁸ Ibid. p.131

⁹ Louis Althusser’s idea of RSA can be defined as the following: The State is a ‘machine’ of repression, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion. (In simple words, it is a tool that is used by the ones in power in order to exercise their power through implements like the army, police, prisons, courts etc., and carry on with the exploitation of the oppressed).

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 16

idea of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)¹¹. All this was resolved when the Congress leader, Priyotoshbabu negotiated between the landlord and the peasants, convincing the latter that they shouldn't fight against the landlord, as they all had a common origin and that they must be united in fighting against the British. The author, who seems to have a leaning towards the Left, describes the followers of the Congress Party in this manner based on the decisions taken by the Indian National Congress (INC). In the agrarian reforms suggested by Jawaharlal Nehru, it clearly states that the Congress policies would accept the existing class conflict as a reality and act according to the context by not antagonizing the peasants as well as the landed class and such antagonism between classes would only affect the development of the nation.

But neither Ali, nor Lakshman were happy with the way matters had ended. When Partha had come back home, he spoke in protest against the recent developments. He said,

“Our landlords may belong to this part of the earth, but they are not our friends. Landlords and farmers are two distinct people, never to be mixed up. And not only here, it is everywhere. Look at Russia-peasants there have made such advances because the landlords have been removed. The poor farmers there used to live in as much misery, hunger and ignorance as you all do. But if you look at them now, you'll be surprised. Instead of illiteracy, poverty and diseases, they live amid much greater happiness. They have started collective farming. Their children go to school. Everyone reads newspapers, goes to the

¹¹ Althusser defines ISAs as a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions like religion, education, family, law, political system, trade-unions, mass communication and culture.

library, reads novels, watches films, takes part in sports, makes speeches, goes to health homes in case they are ill, and what have you!”¹²

This long speech, a stream of consciousness, from Partha made Ali and Lakshman dream of a completely different future and they began striving for it. The seeds of revolution and a classless society were sown deep into their hearts. But soon, Ali had to leave his village and settle down in Calcutta after he married a Brahmin widow, Meghi, with whom he was in love. There was a great fuss created about it in the village and Jagai Banarjee, who had made advances at Meghi several times, made use of this opportunity. He, along with many others, dragged her, shaved her hair off and branded her face with embers from the hookah. And then while parading her through the streets, Partha intervened and threatened Jagai Banarjee that he would drag him to the court. This left Banarjee in fumes, but he had no choice but to let go. After this incident, Ali left for Calcutta with Meghi and they settled down there.

Paharpur

Paharpur is not only an important place, but also a metaphor in this novel. Partha had met Sulakshan Sarkar, another political prisoner, during his wait at some railway station during a transit. Partha had spent two years in prison now and was being moved. Sulakshan, who happened to notice Partha's name on the label of the baggage, began speaking to Partha. They discussed for a while about their lives in various prisons and other political prisoners they knew in common. At the end of six hours, Sulakshan handed over a few books to Partha and they parted, to meet again in the path of revolution. The end of Partha's journey was at Paharpur. This was where Ganesh Das, a fellow political prisoner belonged to. This is where he would have to live now. But since he was a political prisoner, and the authorities had thought that he

¹² Ibid. p. 77

had mellowed down after two years in prison, he was treated well by the intelligence officer who accompanied him. All he had to do was to report at the local police station everyday to mark his attendance.

“When they left, Partha took stock of his surroundings. The soft green shoots of the paddy plants were bathed in sunlight. Long, narrow boats were afloat in the river. The hills in the distance framed the whole scene. A group of girls were on their way somewhere, a riot of colours in their batuns that left their necks and shoulders bare. They wore a number of shell bangles and their features looked Mongolian. They were Hajongs.”¹³

It was in Paharpur that Partha met Sarathi, a young boy who seemed to be in his teens, and had come to help Partha in settling down. Partha took a liking to the boy from the very first instance. Soon, Partha decided to visit Sarathi’s home. Sarathi lived with his mother, father, Gajen, elder brother, Shankhaman and his sister-in-law, Rasumoni. Soon there was a bout of malaria in the village. As always, it took a toll on the villagers as there were no proper health facilities. Partha went around, from house to house, treating patients with bandages, quinine, iodine and other medicines. Soon, Partha became well known in Paharpur and the surrounding villages as well. It was at a time like this that Gajen received his tax receipt from the landlord’s office. Since Partha was here now, Sarathi took the receipt to check if everything was fine. It was then that they realized that the clerk at the landlord’s office had been issuing false receipts. When the peasants paid thirty-three rupees as payment for three years, the receipts issued said that they had only paid rupees twenty-one. And Partha soon realized that this was the case with most villagers. Such exploitation had been taking place for years now. He asked everyone to bring their receipts to him and wrote an

¹³ Ibid. p. 63

application and decided to raise the issue before the SDO. The meeting did take place after a few days, and for the Hajongs, this was a historic event and it reassured their faith in Partha once again. Partha didn't rest there; he began educating peasants of methods to save their crops against pests and creating awareness among them. "We have to be very careful to do things the right way. For example, we all know kerosene is a good antidote, but we always use it wrongly. The correct method is this..."¹⁴

He went about learning new methods of crop preservation from books and taught them to the farmers. But time soon came when Partha had to be moved to some other place. During this transit, he happened to visit home once and this was followed by his release. It was during this visit that he happened to meet Debaki. Debaki, the daughter of Dinabandhu master was in love with Partha. But Partha had only seen her as a sibling. And when she had expressed her desire towards Partha, he was left speechless and she was married off to a rich, young man who turned out to be an abuser. Her life had thus been full of torment. She too later moves to Calcutta after she was driven out of her in-laws' and her child was taken away by force. She went through a lot of sufferings in Calcutta including an attempt to rape by her own uncle. Finally, she stood on her own feet and began working at the tuberculosis hospital along with Meghi. After all her struggles, Debaki began her fight against exploitation in her own ways. When a worker at the hospital was affected with tuberculosis, Debaki and a lot of others came together and created a fund to give her adequate treatment. This soon developed into a large fund raising event in which Ali and Meghi too joined, along with many others. It was also during her life in Calcutta that she met Kunal, a photographer who worked in Calcutta. He was from Kerala and had been working in Calcutta for few years now. Kunal had met Debaki as just another person.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 71

But with time, they grew closer. The more he knew her and about her past, the more he was drawn to her. For Debaki too, she had met someone who was different. Though she had a soft-corner for Partha for a long time, it soon faded and Kunal and Debaki began their journey together holding each other's hands.

Calcutta Days

Partha soon left for Calcutta to continue with his studies. But this was just an excuse to the world around him. He was actually on the mission to fight for peasant rights and against their exploitation. This time, he took to writing and began bringing out an underground weekly, '*Chashi*' (The Farmer). He rented an apartment which was a portion of a house and began his work. It was here that he met Bhadra, a young widow who was living with her father-in-law, Anandbabu. Bhadra's husband had left her for another woman and he had passed away later. But she lived on, working as a Hindi teacher at a school and taking care of Anandbabu. Soon she became really close to Partha and got associated with the movement. She began translating Partha's writings and other writings into Hindi and helped in the bringing out the Hindi edition of *Chashi*. Her life changed over the months and towards the end of the novel, she herself gave up all her luxuries and began fighting for the rights of the peasants as one of them. The work for bringing out *Chashi* was in full flow. Partha was collecting information on peasant movements from everywhere and writing about it. And through his writings, one could realize that various peasant movements were beginning to gather force and to Partha's excitement, Lakshman and other friends from his own village had also started a peasant society. Partha wrote:

“This year, peasants are agitating throughout India. They are raising their voice against the increase of taxes, bonded labour, unlawful takeovers and

evictions. They have been successful in many cases. Some have even set up peasants' societies in their villages. They have to fight against this feudal, imperialist society. For this, they need to organize themselves. They have to bring about such a change that the peasants themselves become the owners of the land, and there is no agency between them and the government.”¹⁵

The slogan of ‘land to the tiller’ was exactly the line taken by the Communists wherever they had been a part of mobilizing peasants and led peasant movements. There were many others who were part of this movement from the city like Jyotirmoy, the newspaper editor, Bhadra, Kunal and so on, who made contributions in their own respective ways. When Kunal fought for the rights of the downtrodden with his camera, Bhadra used her writing and translating skills. By now there were two newspapers too that dealt with the world of the peasants and the workers: *New Light* in English and *Aruna* in Bengali. Bhadra was once surprised to discover that the milkman who used to supply milk in their locality was also a part of the movement. He acted as a courier of messages.

“Bhadra had had no idea that the milkman, Sohan Singh, was a member of Partha’s party. She was suddenly aware of a startling truth: in every small courtyard of this poor country, behind every cowshed, a revolution was taking birth... she could almost hear the *La Marseillaise* from every worker’s house in the neighbourhood.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, in Calcutta, the national movement was picking up pace and there was an attack on the Communists in most places. Ali had lost his job as his manager at the mill suspected him to have Communist sympathies. World War II had begun. There

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 87

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 220

was bombing in Manipur. And the war had its effect on the peasant movements too. The situation of the farmers worsened and there was an impact on the artisans too. The shift from feudalism to pre-capitalism did bring about the breaking down of the society and since India hadn't achieved the rate of growth as it did in the West, the capitalistic sector didn't provide enough space to absorb the leftovers of the transition. Hence, many people were forced to take to agriculture labouring and sharecropping. Back in Partha's village, the potter, Keshto was suffering so much as no one wanted his clay toys any longer and instead preferred the plastic ones. He soon knew that his pots and vessels would be replaced by metal ones. The primary school where Dinabandhu master had taught for years now was being pulled down to give way for the railway line that would favour the British in carrying out their operations and exploitation further effectively. And a lot of farm land was going to be acquired for the railway lines. Hence, many farmers were going to be dispossessed of their land. And Amulya, the weaver couldn't keep up his promise of delivering Dinabandhu master with two saris for his daughters as the weaver was too busy meeting orders from the military. Everything was breaking down, and there was chaos everywhere. And above all, the *zamindar* imposed a war tax on the farmers in order to meet the expenses of the military and hence to keep the imperial rulers happy. The movement had weakened for a while, but to regain more force after the war. On another side, people like Bhadra were very disturbed when the Communist party took the People's War line after the Soviet Union entered into the war. Overnight, it had transformed from a Imperialist war to People's war. Bhadra felt betrayed and disappointed.

Another major effect of the war was the beginning of accumulation and hoarding¹⁷ of food grains and produce by the landlords and their men. Partha and Sulakshan tried to convince the farmers not to sell all their produces even if they got slightly higher prices. The landlord and his men were giving a slightly higher amount and luring the farmers to sell off all they had produced. But the strategy was that once they bought up everything and hoarded all the produce, the farmers and the villagers would automatically be dependent on the hoarders for their basic necessities of food and they could be exploited even further.

“Things are looking bad. I think it’s going to be almost impossible to rescue the farmers from this trap of advance payment. Almost 75 percent of the *aus* crop has already been stocked. Our only hope now is to save the *aman* crop. On last market day, the price of rice climbed to twelve rupees.”¹⁸

One day, Partha received a letter from Ganesh Das that he was needed back in Paharpur. Hence, Partha decided to go back.

“‘Paharpur needs you again,’ it said. The land is fertile. We only need a farmer. Many prisoners are also being freed. There will be many to take care of the newspaper. But there’s no one in Paharpur.”¹⁹

Return to Paharpur

At Paharpur, the harvest was over and the fields were lying bare. The farmers were waiting for their settlement. Gajen had just returned from the granary and looked disturbed. The *nayeb* had threatened the farmers that the landlord would withhold the year’s settlement until they paid off a year’s debt and that he had also decided to give

¹⁷ “Police harassment of different kinds, physical assault by the landlord’s hired men, looting of stored grain and the like were the more known forms of oppression.” (Majumdar: 2011, p. 21)

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 210

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 99

away the land on lease to the sharecroppers, mainly belonging to the Muslim community. All the agitation and resistance had got on to the landlord's nerves. Hence, in order to continue cultivation and farming, most farmers ended up giving up most of their produce to the *nayeb*. And other than this, the *nayeb* had ordered Gajen to arrange for a goat for some feast at the landlord's house. Ganesh Das and others had been trying to convince the farmers not to give away their produce to the landlord's grain store until they had the right to their land, but many farmers, fearing the consequences, gave most of their produce away. Partha had returned and everyone was excited on his arrival. He swung into action straight away and began talking to the peasants. Partha said,

“...it is the farmer who toils from dawn to dusk in the fields, but the harvest is stored in the zamindar's granary. Why doesn't the farmer have the right over an inch of the land where he spends the better part of his life?”²⁰

The meeting ended in the night with Partha managing to convince the ones present. Sankhaman had now taken to stealing fish from the pond. Sarathi was not very happy about it, but it was required to keep the family alive. A few days later, the *zamindar* stationed his men near the forest from where the villagers used to collect firewood. The cutting of trees and collection of firewood was banned too. The villagers were being tormented and exploited in all ways. Gajen had literally grown up playing in and around the forest. The forest had become a part of all their lives. He said disappointedly, “Now it's only fish that we are stealing, what will it be next? Possibly wood. The way things are developing, we might even have to steal paddy in the future.”²¹

²⁰ Ibid. p. 132

²¹ Ibid. p. 134

Partha was in his tin-roofed shed when he had a visitor. It was Sulakshan and he was married to Lata. Lata had grown up in an ashram where many like Partha were given refuge. When Sulakshan once visited the ashram, to meet his grandmother, they happened to meet and fall in love. After years of waiting, they were now together. Lata, later begins many activities for the empowerment of women and strongly believed that the wife of a revolutionary must not idle away her time like others. Sulakshan wished to stay and help Partha, but he was soon sent to Shivbari, where he was to take care of the peasant movements. Now, along with the other movements, they also decided that they would fight against 'tonk' or sharecropping. The practice of sharecropping only provided temporary relief and in the long run, worsened the condition of the farmers and the sharecroppers.

When the *zamindar* realised that the farmers were not going to part with the rest of their produce, he declared that if the farmers didn't reach the paddy to the granary within a week's time, he would file a case against them. But the farmers did not submit to these threats. Soon, the *zamindar* sent his men in ox carts and on elephants in order to take away the paddy. The womenfolk of the house hurried back to hide away all that they could so that they will not have to starve. The villagers resisted the *zamindar's* army with improvised weapons like *supari* trunks, fishing hooks and spears. There was a clash between the farmers and the *zamindar's* men.²² There were screams and shouts heard from everywhere. The elephants running havoc had trampled all little vegetable produced that were ready for harvest. Suddenly, a flying spear hurt one of the elephants and the animal's madness frightened everyone. There was blood spread over the paddy on the earth. Some of the *zamindar's* men

²² "Apart from traditional arms the most important thing was the strength of numbers...confrontation meant facing the landlord's gunman along with the armed police, it needed a protracted insurgency in which peasant casualties were to be prepared for." (Majumdar: 2011, p. 21)

were hurt and many farmers were wounded badly. But the *zamindar's* men didn't return home, but to the police station and lodged a complaint against the villagers.

Partha, who had been away to another village on an errand, rushed back on hearing what had happened. By now, it was confirmed that a case was filed against the villagers and that there was a warrant issued against Sarathi and few others. Partha called a meeting that night and it was decided that Sarathi would surrender since he having to go into hiding would only weaken the legal position of the villagers. Partha then said,

“We shall lay down our lives, but we will not give up our right to our own produce... They have looted your rice, destroyed your houses, stolen your poultry. They have molested your women. You must file a case against the *zamindar* demanding compensation.”²³

That night Partha couldn't sleep. He was agitated and very disturbed. Sarathi was in police custody. The village still lay torn apart and the burden of raising monetary support for fighting the case against the *zamindar* had also partly fallen on him. He returned to his room, poured some oil into the lamp and sat down to write an appeal to his friends in Paharpur. The appeal was written.

“The zamindar collects an annual revenue of eight to ten maunds of paddy from that land which yields only fifteen to twenty maunds in one-and-a-quarter acre per year. Even if there is flood or drought the farmers are forced to pay revenue at this rate. The self-imposed rule of the zamindar results in acute misery for the farmer. He is not even left with enough rice to feed his family. When reduced to such a state of penury, the farmer is naturally unable

²³ Ibid. p. 159

to pay his dues; but the zamindar does not hesitate to use force in such cases. He is even known to have looted and destroyed the farmers' grain stores for what he considers to be his 'due' share of the produce... We demand the tonk system of farming be abolished. The tonk farmers should get back the rights to their own land on a fixed tenure. A new system of paying cash taxes on land should be introduced instead of giving away a part of the produce as revenue. The zamindar cannot demand extra revenue on the land converted from tonk land to land on tenure."²⁴

Worker-Peasant Alliance

Sulakshan was now back at Shivbari and began working there. He noticed that many farmers had taken up jobs at the jute mill. Their living standards were as bad as the peasants. He spent some time with the workers and realised that they were equally exploited as the peasants. The managers of the various companies were leading a luxurious life in their bungalows when the workers were living below human standards. Sulakshan also realised that among the workers, a large population belonged to non-Bengali, Muslim communities.

“Tugboats waited impatiently on the riverbank-there was no way that the machines could stop rolling. The entire European continent and America were waiting for these bales of jute, and in their interest, the clerks, supervisors and farmers here worked non-stop. Every year the farmers crowded the houses of moneylenders to buy jute seeds.”²⁵

Sulakshan was pretty much aware about the invisible power of Capitalism that was controlling all these activities. Here, he met two workers, Rajaram and Aziz, with

²⁴ Ibid. p. 160

²⁵ Ibid. P. 147

whom he began visiting the homes of the workers and began talking to them about their rights and trying to inculcate into them the values of freedom and fight against exploitation. Sulakshan tried to point out to the workers on how these managers were living a life of comfort by enslaving the workers. He spoke against the headmen who were pocketing half their salaries which was even otherwise only a meagre amount. Sulakshan did succeed a little in explaining the workers that their interests were common with the interests of the farmers. They were both equally exploited. And hence in times of distress for the farmers, the workers must join with them and fight against exploitation and support the farmers.²⁶

A few days later, Partha too arrived in Shivbari in order to raise funds for the farmers of Paharpur. He, along with Sulakshan, visited the workers and spoke to them convincing them further. They spoke at length about the peasant movement in Paharpur and convinced the workers that their interest was similar to that of Paharpur. Partha stressed on this factor that the interests of the farmer and the worker were identical. This was the line taken by the Communist party during this period and that reflected on the peasant leaders.

“They had once been farmers themselves and had owned land and cattle. After the traps set by the zamindar and the moneylender, all that had become history. Their only hope lay in the Jute Press Workers’ Union. But the farmers did not even have such an organization. The workers, therefore, readily donated as much as they could for running the farmers’ case against the zamindar.”²⁷

²⁶ “...the jute mills of Bengal expressed their ‘firm determination to support the Tebagha struggle of their Kisan brother’ at meetings held at different places.” (Majumdar: 2011, p. 143)

²⁷ Ibid. p. 171

Partha returned to Paharpur soon as the Circle Officer was expected to come and investigate the incident at Paharpur. But Partha was not completely satisfied as he had expected the magistrate to come and look into this matter as it was a serious issue. The young Officer was pretty convinced that the farmers had been wronged and this reassured the villagers that they would be given justice. But, by evening, information reached the villagers that the Officer was bribed, and that the issue was 'settled' by the *zamindar's* men. Since there was no point waiting, the farmers began tilling the land again and once again life returned to its regular rhythm. But now, there was a new issue. The *zamindar*, who was offended, began leasing out land to sharecroppers. This struck as a hurricane right after heavy rains and killed all the hope that was left in the farmers. And to even worsen the situation, Gajen's land was next in line to be leased out to the sharecroppers; meanwhile the verdict against Sarathi was announced and he was sentenced to six months imprisonment.

Partha now had another challenge before him. Along with collecting money to fight the *zamindar*, he now also had taken upon the challenge of the communal disturbance created by the colonial regime. He had to convince the Muslim sharecroppers that the Hindu farmers too suffered the same plight as they had and that they had to fight united against the *zamindar* and the colonial suppressors. He was now back in Calcutta trying to collect funds through the *Kisan* office.

Peasant Movements

At Shivbari, the workers and the farmers were getting ready to confront the Magistrate who was expected to visit the village. They made posters that demanded regulation of rice trade, demand for free seeds and rice at fair price. Hoarding of food grains had become a major issue in many villages by now. After long negotiations, the

magistrate agreed to ensure that the hoarded food grains be returned. But Partha and Sulakshan asked the farmers not to give up their fight as their unity had achieved them this first victory. They told them that the fight should only be stopped when they achieved rights over the land they tilled.

But the situation at Paharpur had not improved. It had worsened. Bhadra, whose husband happened to belong to the family of the *zamindar* through maternal lineage, in the Paharpur region, was also present at her husband's ancestral home for the coming *Durga puja*. When Partha returned, he realised that Sarathi's mother and wife, Saraswati, were now working at the missionary farm. The missionaries had come and set up a farm which in turn provided another godown for the hoarding of not only food grains, but this time also basic necessities like salt. Many of the farmers and their family members now worked there in exchange for food grains. And the rest of the money they had, they spent on buying basic necessities from the missionary farm only. From farmers, they had now become farm labourers. Partha was furious with this new trap laid by the missionary fathers, who were once again agents of imperialism.

One day, an agent of the *zamindar* visited Gajen's house demanding their produce. Sankhaman replied to him that they wouldn't send their produce this time to the landlord's granary, instead they would store it in the peasants' society's granary. The agent conveyed this to the *nayeb*. It was decided that a selected representative from the village could speak to the *nayeb* regarding this new decision of the farmers. Sankhaman was hence selected and he went to meet the *nayeb*. This was a trap. Sankhaman was tied up and beaten to pulp by the *nayeb's* men. He was violently tortured. Bhadra, who happened to be at the same house, heard his screams and enquired about the incident. When she came to know what had happened, she left

immediately and decided to go back to Anandbabu's house at Banagram. After moving there, she dedicated herself to social service and working among the poor, along with her nephew Tipu.

Partha, on knowing what had happened, became furious. They brought back Sankhaman and Partha dressed his wounds and treated him. The villagers were also angry with the injustice. They were all ready with *lathis* in their hands. Partha burst out in fury:

“We will harvest the crop tomorrow, because the zamindar says that tomorrow he will send his men. We will collect the paddy in our barn before they arrive. Sankhaman's humiliation is an insult to all Hajongs. It's an insult to all peasants. There can be only one answer- the zamindar shall not lay his hand on a grain of rice.”²⁸

This marked the beginning of the Tebagha movement.

Elsewhere, the state had now begun using the military against the agitating, famine-afflicted farmers and villagers. In Paharpur, the conditions of the peasants had worsened since then. There would always be a long queue in front of the shop opened by the missionaries. Once again penal provisions in the law were used to contain the outbursts. It was declared, according to the Indian Security Act, that a gathering of more than five people in Paharpur was prohibited and that violators would be imprisoned. Sarathi was released by now, but there was information that a warrant would be issued against Partha soon. The landlords had agreed to a few demands of the farmers but in order to curtail further protests and keep their interests safe, they along with the government were hunting down the leaders of the movement. Hence

²⁸ Ibid. p. 280

Partha soon left Paharpur and headed for the forests where he, along with many such fighters, had decided to camp to stay safe from the government agents. He was joined by Sulakshan and Sankhaman. Partha had taken his mother along to the camp as she was alone now. Sudam had deserted her for another woman. From now on, all their activities would be carried out from the forests. Partha had managed to convince the people of the hills, like the Garos, to join the movement. Sarathi too joined them and worked with a few blacksmiths making weapons like spears for the coming war. In the night, when everyone rested, Partha couldn't. He sat up and began writing about the actual factors that caused the recent famine.

“The Famine Commission has reported that the real reason behind the famine was not the dearth of rice, but its abnormal price hike...In other words, the people really responsible for the famine are the hoarders. Nothing less than five acres of land yield enough paddy for the entire year for a standard household. In this country 57 percent of families have less than three acres of land. They were the ones to be hit the worst by the famine.”²⁹

In the early hours the day after this, Partha called for a secret meeting with the elders of the village. They confirmed their decision that they would harvest their crops immediately in order to foil the attempt of the landlord's men to loot the harvest. The word soon spread around and the farmers all over the region were excited, alert and ready.

“At the stroke of midnight, all the farmers of Paharpur started harvesting. Time passed swiftly as hands worked feverishly. The tired moon of the late night shone on the bent heads. Field after field became bare as father worked beside son, brother beside brother. Hundreds of voices rose in a song of hope.

²⁹ Ibid. Pp. 334-35

A dream that they had dared to dream was turning into reality. It was the beginning that they all had been hoping for.”³⁰

The war had now begun. The farmers were determined to fight against the landlords’ tyranny and the British colonial regime. But the ones in power were also working, in their own ways, to tackle the resistance. One day, as Gajen was in the field getting it ready for sowing seeds, an aeroplane flew very low and dropped bundles of pamphlets that said that the Communists were their enemies and that they would only worsen the conditions of the farmers. When this didn’t seem to work, the military arrived. The military set Sarathi’s home on fire and it was reduced to ashes in a few minutes and no one could do anything about it. Saraswati, in a fit of anger, cooked a meal and left for the forest. She had been occasionally cooking food for the revolutionaries. Partha consoled her that Sarathi would soon come and rebuild the house himself and then she was reassured.

Partha and the rest of the villagers had now returned to Paharpur and were discussing about their future plans. Suddenly, Saraswati noticed Kartik, who happened to be her ex-husband and an agent of the landlord, walking towards the office. At the same time, a military van too followed him and parked itself behind the office. Saraswati rushed towards the house in which Partha and the others were holding a meeting. But she was captured by the *zamindar’s* men. They beat her mercilessly asking here about the whereabouts of Partha and the others. She didn’t open her mouth except to wail out loud in pain. The wailing had become so loud that the meeting was disrupted. Simultaneously, the villagers and Sarathi’s mother rushed towards the two men in order to free Saraswati. The men, finding themselves outnumbered, left her and rushed towards the *zamindar’s* office. This was indeed a

³⁰ Ibid. p. 336

trap. Most of the villagers had now been exposed and suddenly the military opened fire. And as soon as the first shot was heard, there was a scream. A bullet had pierced Sarathi's mother who happened to be in the frontline. Before he could react, Partha realised that he had been shot too. Sarathi's mother collapsed on the ground and Partha experienced a shooting pain in his shoulder. It was then that he realised that the military had been called to tame the resistance. Partha asked everyone to lie on the ground. Three rounds of bullets were fired. The firing stopped. The military assumed that they had put an end to the resistance and stopped the firing. The colonial government had made the people of the colonised country to shoot and kill their own brothers and sisters. The villagers soon moved Partha to a hut and Sarathi's mother's body was also removed. All the villagers had by now gathered around Partha. Suddenly there was the sound of a horn from the forests bordering the village. It was the signal for the movement to begin.

“Partha's eyes opened wide at the first sound. His body stiffened and then relaxed as the answering echoes reached him from the distant hillocks. A faint smile touched his lips. Blood oozed out of the wound in his shoulder.”³¹

Soon, a huge army of people descended from the mountains carrying all kinds of weapons, seen and unseen. They were the Hajongs, the Garos and people belonging to all farming communities and nearby villages³². The military soon got frightened by the size of the peoples' army and ran away. At Shivbari, Sulakshan led the tribals and stood with his head high. He had been accepted as a serious leader and on his command some men had killed Rajen Sarkar, an agent of the landlord who was running the hoarding business in the region. Miles away, in Calcutta, when Debaki

³¹ Ibid. p. 366

³² “An important feature of this movement was the participation of tribal peasants who came to the forefront immediately.” (Majumdar: 2011, p. 71)

heard this news, she along with many others decided to donate blood for their fellow brothers and sisters who were in need. Debaki joined the long queue. Kunal was with her too. Once she was done, he told her, “Even if a thousand police sergeants fire their machine guns, they won’t be able to obliterate men like your Parthada...The Parthas of this world can never die.”³³

³³ Ibid. p. 370

Conclusion

According to Terry Eagleton, a writer (author) responds to the general history of the society he lives in from his point of view, having an understanding of it in his terms. Hence, the author's thought is moulded to an extent, by the time and space he exists in; the author is a product of his times and society. Since, the methodology adopted in this study is Marxist literary criticism, it is necessary to locate the authors of the chosen texts in the society they lived in and the productive relations of their times. Mulk Raj Anand and Munshi Premchand were products of a transitional phase in Indian history. Anand seems to be in constant conflict with himself while writing the *Punjab Trilogy*. Anand, like many others in his times was influenced by the Left-wing that rode the struggle for freedom, a trend that was dominant post-1920s in the Indian National Congress; it is also a fact that Jawaharlal Nehru who strode like an albatross among the intelligentsia of the times. This fascination for Nehruvian socialism reflects prominently in his other works as well; *Untouchables* (1935) is one such. However, Anand, like many others in his times as much as Nehru himself was unable to stay clear of Gandhi in many ways and this is also reflected in his works. But, in the *Punjab Trilogy* Anand is unambiguously closer to the Nehruvian tendency of leaning towards the Left (Communism) and holds the transition to modernity as the way to progress. This is brought out by Anand through the protagonist, Lalu, rejecting everything else and seeks liberation of the peasants through the struggle against colonialism and private property in the same breath. The activities of the Indian National Congress, appropriating the peasant movement in the Avadh region and the conflict of interest between the landlord and the peasant must have contributed to the disillusionment in the mind of the author. Lalu is very disappointed with his encounter with Gandhiji, for whom he had immense respect, and is left confused and intrigued

when Nehru doesn't visit the *Kisan Nagar*, which Lalu along with other peasants had built as part of the resistance movement of the evicted peasants. The protagonist is also disgusted with the elite leadership of the peasant movement such as Kanwar Amarpal Singh and others. Professor Verma also seems to be interested only in debating and writing a book about the Indian society and not playing an active role in changing it. The Communists during this period also criticized the elite nationalists in a similar manner, calling it 'bourgeoisie nationalism'. The disillusionment of the author reflects in the *Punjab Trilogy*, as Lalu struggles alongside the peasants while many others walk along the comforts of the estate. Anand's proclivity to the Left is evident as Lalu is convinced that only revolution will bring about a change.

Munshi Premchand wrote *Godan* during the 1930s and it was published in 1936. This, indeed, was the period when the radical phase of peasant struggles had reached its peak in the Avadh region. The post-famine period had worsened the situation of the peasants and the ongoing freedom struggle and resistance provided the ground for the peasant movement to achieve new heights. But Premchand was caught up in his own disillusionment. He believed that change would occur due to a change of heart of the oppressors and this reflected in his literature preceding *Poos ki Raat* (1936). The idealist in him got entangled in the nets of reality and his transition from idealism to realism is evident in the short story. In *Godan* he travels further deep into the reality of the Indian village and the lives of Indian peasantry. The novel depicts the life of Hori, a peasant. The conflict between Hori and Gobar is a reflection of the reality of the society, which at that point in time, was in a state of transition; there was migration from the villages to the towns and cities; where the younger generations were moving out of the villages, quitting agriculture, in search of better fortunes in the cities, in the industries and factories. The realist in Premchand exposes the stark

reality in which the peasant continues to suffer through his life. Premchand indeed is a writer of all times and his thoughts were much ahead of his times, though rooted in his very times.

Sabitri Roy seems to be very clear and concrete on her stance. By the time she writes the novel, *Harvest Song*, the Communists have had a strong base and hold in the Bengal region. This reflects the clarity in her writing of the novel. The Communists played an important role in the mobilization of the peasants against the exploitative landlords and imperial government. They worked at the grassroots in the villages and played an important role in initiation of the Tebhaga movement. They educated the peasants and created awareness among them and united them against the evil exploitative forces. This reflects in Roy's glorification of the protagonist, Partha Das. The educated peasant-leader, prisoner of war and a martyr, is then the perfect hero in this novel. Partha travels across Bengal, straddling between the rustic rural and the crowded city, educating the peasants on the ways to protect their harvests from the attack of pests and creating awareness among them against the exploitation of the landlord and his men. The only conflict she has and is reflected in the novel, is about the communist party's shifting stand on the nature of the World War II; Roy makes a direct reference to the Peoples' War line, through Bhadra, taken by the Communist Party during the World War II with the entry of Soviet Union into the War. *Harvest Song* ends with the rising tide of revolution as heard in the war songs that Partha hears as he lay dying after being hit by a bullet of the British Indian army, by a soldier who could have probably been Anand's Lalu.

A common factor in all the selected texts is the tradition-modernity debate between the older and the younger generations. Nihalu (from the *Punjab Trilogy*), Hori (*Godan*) and Sudam (*Harvest Song*), all seem to be taking the exploitation with a

stoic reality. They seemed to accept their fate and more than that have become socially conditioned in a way it has been for years and the seeds of resistance would never sprout inside them. They take all the sufferings silently and are too rooted in tradition and customs and believe that the landlord and their men are superior to them and it was the duty of the peasant to serve them. In a way something that Gandhi attributed to the stability that was achieved by tradition and hence stressed upon the need to preserve it as well. And they also disagree with the next generation's desire to break away from the tradition and resist the exploitative agents. The younger generation moves toward modernity and play an important role in the resistance and struggle against the landlords and the imperial policies. But, they eventually return to their very roots in these texts; for instance, both Lalu and Gobar simply move out of their villages and families and end up in the town where they see themselves liberated in the beginning. In the case of Gobar, he moves to the town in search of a better life, but realises and lives through the harsh realities of the city and eventually returns to his village. With Lalu, he goes and enlists himself in the Army with high hopes and to escape the clutches of the police. His decisions to crop his hair and later to enlist in the army are forms of resistance in the author's imagination. But in the end, his hair grows long as it was before he cropped it off and he returns to his own identity as a Sikh, the very reality he had run away from. Though there is a conflict between Sudam and Partha, in *Harvest Song*, regarding resistance against the landlord, Partha through the novel stays attached to the village and traditional values. Though he educates the peasants in the village on the modern methods with which their crop could be protected. The above mentioned factor about the clarity in Sabitri Roy's writing could be the possible reason for this whereas, both Anand and Premchand

wrote during a period of transition and this reflects in the generational transition and the conflict between tradition and modernity between them in the novels.

The transition from peasant to farmer took place in many parts of India during the post-Independence years where the cultivator was not dependant on the landlord anymore, but on the market. This market turned out to be an even worse form of exploitation. The greed for land and resources that arose in the race for ‘developing the nation’ made the farmer a victim. Both Premchand and Anand are not really clear if modernity would bring about the change, as suggested by Nehru, or if a change of heart and the traditional ways of farming would sustain the agrarian society, as suggested by Gandhi. The models and ideas suggested by both Gandhi and Nehru seemed to have failed, and the need for a systemic change is necessary to alleviate the conditions of the farmer. Something akin to what Sabitri Roy presents in her novel. For instance, in the United States of America, the transition to capitalistic agriculture had happened decades ago and the farmer dependent on the market also came to grief and evicted from his own land. This is reflected in John Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) where the Joad family sets out from the rural farming Oklahoma to the busy and happening California in search of better lives as they have lost their land to larger agricultural interests and end up as menial workers. This perhaps can be the subject matter of another study.

The post-Independence years witnessed various land reforms to which, the peasant movements before Independence laid the foundation. The economic programme that dealt with the questions of capital, labour and land laws had intrigued the Congress leaders for a long time. India being an agricultural country, the Congress felt the necessity to address this issue. Due to the difference in land legislations introduced by the colonial government in different regions, there was a lack of

uniformity in land laws in various parts of the newly independent country. The Congress also had another major conflict of interest, caught between the exploitative landlords- the *zamindars* and the exploited peasants. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India and the mastermind of the agrarian programme for the Congress says,

“There should be no doubt that the basis of any agrarian programme must be the good of the man in the field- the cultivator, as well as the landless man who would cultivate if he had the chance.”¹

Nehru, through the agrarian programme, planned a larger economic model that would help in the building of the nation in a self-sustainable manner. Hence, land reforms played an important role in the larger model required for nation building. There were three basic systems that existed in India during the colonial period- *Zamindari* system, *Mahalwari* system and the *Ryotwari* system. Though various amendments were made, following peasant uprisings and movements, in the regions that came under these respective systems, it was necessary to uproot these systems that the British used to control the agrarian society and market for years. The continuation of elements of the feudal character that existed through the *dureé* the colonial regime had to be uprooted. After independence, the Indian National Congress appointed an Agrarian Reforms Committee under the chairmanship of J. C. Kumarappa in order to study in detail, the agrarian relations that existed in the country. The Committee suggested that the existing systems with the middleman and landlord constituting the top half of the pyramid must be eliminated and the peasant should be directly associated with the State, without any intermediary. Soon, the nation saw land reforms that included the abolition of *zamindari*, tenancy reforms, ceilings on landholdings, etc. This did have

¹ Iyengar, Uma (ed.). *The Oxford India Nehru*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 220

an impact but there were infirmities with their implementation and the ripple grew weaker as it spread around the vast lake. By the time it reached the banks, the ripple lost its intensity, and the water lay still. Though landlordism came to an end, the elite in the village existed and continued to exploit the peasants. There were various legislations passed by the independent government, but the peasant continued to be exploited in one way or the other; only the degree had reduced. For instance, after the passing of the Zamindari Abolition Act by the various Provincial Governments in the immediate wake of independence, the *zamindars* had the provision to retain land for their cultivation. They did so and since there was no law on tenancy passed then, many showed their tenants as their servants and retained the land that belonged to them too. Hence, Premchand's Hori continued to live in the Indian villages among the peasants, indebted and exploited.

Another huge wave that struck the Indian peasants in the form of a tsunami was the Green Revolution, which was meant to introduce the Indian agrarian society into a new world of machinery and methodology and take the Indian peasants to new heights. But with the coming of this, the distinction between the categories among the peasantry became more pronounced as the poor farmer who had less land holdings couldn't afford to upgrade to higher technology for want of such money as was needed in the event as investment. Many peasants ended up leasing out their land and working as labourers or tenants. The 'technologization' of the agrarian society pushed the Indian peasant into deeper and darker holes. The further shift in policy in independent India and the concessions to foreign investment in industry added another new dimension to the existing woes of the tribal-peasants. He had to give up his land and watch it be shredded into stripes of earth as the multinational corporations dug deeper to satiate their greed. And when he resisted, like his ancestors

did during the Santhal Rebellion, he was tagged as the nation's 'biggest internal security threat' and hunted down by the police and the military, just like it happened in Bengal during the Tebhaga movement.

The present day, though the conditions of the peasants have worsened and the numbers of incidents of peasant suicide are on the increase, shows some ray of hope with a few judgements that come against the exploitative corporate world and in favour of the farmers. For instance, in the recent judgement, on the 31st of August, 2016, by the Supreme Court in the case, Kedar Nath Yadav versus State of West Bengal and Ors., otherwise known as the Singur case, where the government of West Bengal had acquired around 1000 acres of farm land for the Tata Motors Limited in order to set up a Tata Nano car manufacturing plant. The judgement directed the West Bengal government to return the acquired land to the cultivators. It also mentioned that the compensation paid to the farmers in exchange of the acquired land could not be collected back and the corporate house to pay the compensation to the farmers who didn't accept it then. The colonial law of the Land Acquisition Act (1894) was used in acquiring the land from the farmers for the sake of 'public purpose'; the Supreme Court questioned this and the land was returned to the farmers. The agricultural land belongs to the tiller, and through such judgements the long existing 'land to the tiller' movement seems to be resurrecting and working in favour of the farmers and peasants in India. Hori's dream of having a cow without having to suffer through his life and die without the dream coming through could become a reality. Lalu would till on his own land without having to fear the ever plotting landlord; or Partha would for once spend time at his home. Hori continues to live in the Indian villages, so does Partha. They live own, fighting for a better tomorrow. A tomorrow that is today, and a tomorrow that would soon come.

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