

Locating the Peasant in Hindi Fictional Narratives: A Study of Peasant and Land Relations in India through Select Hindi Short Stories

Ms. Barkha

PhD Scholar in Department of English, University of Delhi.

Abstract

Agriculture has been the prime source of livelihood for a majority of India's population. Land and peasant, therefore, have held a central position in its repository of fictional narratives in regional languages. The exploitation of the peasants in both colonial and postcolonial India is evident through these narratives. Both the advent and the end of British rule in India brought a drastic change in land relations and repressive and exploitative schemes for the peasants. What gave the 'tax-collector mediators' ownership of the land, bringing exploitative Zamindari system in the colonial regime through legislation like Permanent

Settlement Act 1793, became difficult to eradicate on the ground level in the multi-layered agrarian structure in postcolonial India. The Land Reform project of Independent India proceeded with four significant steps: abolition of Zamindari, tenancy reforms, fixing land ceilings and consolidation of landholdings under the chairmanship of the Gandhian Economist J.C. Kumarappa, brought minuscule change for small peasants. Covering a period of around six decades with reference to select short stories in Hindi Literature, the paper attempts to study the representation of the peasant, the land and the exploitative power mechanisms affecting the relationship between the two. The relationship between the exploiter and the exploited is further complicated and complemented by the stringent hierarchical caste system. Nevertheless, the paper will study caste relations as a subtheme. Finally, through Narratology, I shall critically analyse the changes in the narration and characterisation in the chosen time span led by various Hindi Literary movements.

Keywords: Land, Peasant, Caste, Hindi Short Story, Literary Movements

Introduction

Indian agrarian structure has undergone significant changes during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. In the colonial period, the focus was on producing commercial crops, majorly for exportation. The attempts to modernise agriculture, too, therefore, were only limited to the production of non-food crops. In this period, agriculture was divided into three types of settlements – *Mahalwari*, *Ryotwari* and *Zamindari* (under the *Mahalwari* system, the village headmen collected the land revenue from the farmers on behalf of the whole village. Under *Ryotwari*, it was paid by the farmers directly to the state, and under *Zamindari*, the revenue was collected by the *Zamindars*). Although peasant revolts were common during the time, peasantry was not a theme taken by many writers in Hindi literature during the colonial period. According to Bhushan, before Premchand "in only three novels – Bhuneshwar Mishra's *Gharau Ghatna* (Household Event, 1893), and Balwant Bhumihaar (1901), and Mannan Dwivedi Gajpuri's *Ramlal* (1917), there was description of village life" (Moral Economy, 1228). Although these novels represented rural life, the issues of peasants found no space in these narratives. Premchand's writings advocate the rights of the marginalised peasant. In his

presidential speech of Progressive Writer's Association, he calls it writer's "duty to help all those who are downtrodden, oppressed and exploited — individuals or groups — and to advocate their cause" (np). Therefore, for the colonial era, I have selected two short stories by Premchand, "The Sacrifice" (*Balidan*) and "A Winter's Night" (*Poos ki Raat*) published in 1918 and 1930 respectively, to shed light on the issues of land and the representation of the peasant during the colonial period. Post-independence, the changes in land relations were played out due to two major factors: land reforms in the 1950s and technological advancements in the 60s. For the post-independence period I have selected Bhisham Sahni's "Jot" (1954), also representing the "*Nayi Kahani*" movement. Unlike other stories, "Jot" provides vignettes of the struggles of peasant in hilly region. A significant change in the portrayal of the peasant can be witnessed in "*Sadak*" by Jagjit Dixit and "*Ashad Ka Ek Din*" by Jawahar Singh. These two stories are marked by the rebellious spirit of the "*Janvadi Kahani*" movement in Hindi Literature. Through the select short stories, this paper will study the representation of the peasant, the land and the exploitative power mechanisms dominating the relationship between the two.

Colonial Period: Peasant in Premchandeian Era

Today Premchand is known most fondly for his representation of the rural, however it is interesting to note that during Premchand's early phase of writing, peasantry and the rural did not find place in the Hindi or Urdu traditions of writing. According to Shashi Bhushan, the Urdu tradition considered any association with the rural beneath them while strictly maintaining its involvement with the urban refinement. He calls such writers "'intellectual capitalist', who, after having received the best education uses it for his own private ends" (The Purpose of Literature). On the other hand, descriptions of the village life could be found in Hindi fiction of this time, but the issues of peasant were not addressed (Moral Economy, 1228). Despite the absence of the same in both the Hindi and Urdu Literary traditions that he drew from, he fiercely took charge to represent this section of society, not just in Hindi but also in the sophisticated realm of Urdu literature. Since this paper limits itself to Hindi fiction, therefore it will intertextually refer to the Urdu short story "A Quarter and One Ser Wheat" (1924).

Premchand has written 302 short stories. His stories can be divided into four phases. The first phase compiles his initial stories written between 1907–1911, these stories are based on historical events, legends and ballads of love. The stories in the second phase between 1912–1918, move towards the depiction of social fabric and issues prevalent in the society marked by an idealism. "Saut", "Panch Parmeshwar", "Namak ka Daroga" and "Bade Ghar ki Beti" are some of the stories written during this phase. "Panch Parmeshwar", presenting the ideal Gram Panchayat, "Namak ka Daroga", presenting the ideal of honesty and its rewards in a job, "Bade Ghar ki Beti" presenting the ideal of joint family. The third phase between 1919–1929 shows an influence of Gandhian ideals. During the last phase between 1930–1936, his stories move towards realism from the earlier state of idealism. The stories written during this phase critique social, cultural, religious and economic injustice prevalent in the society without caring to provide any solution unlike the initial phases.

Set in the unnamed parts of rural colonial India, "The Sacrifice" and "A Winter's Night", depict the degrading state of farming and the peasant's helpless attachment with the

occupation. The stories are written in two different phases of Premchand's literary career, "The Sacrifice" in second phase while "A Winter's Night" in the last phase. There is a gap of 12 years between the publication of the two stories, yet the condition and issues of the peasants remain the same. The two stories are a critique of the Zamindari system and tenant farming. The exploitative land revenue system of Zamindari was abolished much later after the death of Premchand in 1950. The Zamindari system was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 through the Permanent Settlement Act. Under this act, the *zamindars* were recognized as the landowners and given hereditary rights of the land as long as they keep paying a fixed revenue to the British government. This system made the landowners the master of the small peasants who were robbed off their land, ending up as tenants. Premchand represents the plight of this marginalized section with empathy correlating it to the then nationalist spirit of freedom. The protagonists of both the stories Girdhari and Halku work as tenant farmers under this system. Under the raised taxes and exploitative system of Zamindari, the peasants are caught in an endless web of debt with rising interest. In both the stories Tenant farming is contrasted with wage labour system. "The Sacrifice" ends with Girdhari's son working as a labourer. While farming could not provide one complete meal a day, the wage system was able to provide them with curry twice a day, "and they can now afford wheat and rice instead of millet" (np). It is significant to note that the variety of grain being consumed also represents one's status in the hierarchical Indian agrarian society. The lower class consumed coarse grain like millet, while the upper class ate wheat. Despite the peasant being the sole worker in fields, he eats a coarse grain, while fine varieties of grain like wheat are consumed by the landlords. The peasant in Premchand's story is hegemonized and unaware of this difference unlike the peasant in *Janvadi Kahani* discussed later. Premchand also takes dig at the feudal system of India, which is not capitalistic in nature. Although Girdhari's son is dressed in shirt and English shoes, and he is able to afford the grain consumed by the upperclass, still he and his mother, Subhagi are not respectable in the feudal society, Subhagi now "is an outsider in the village, a pariah dog, not seen in *panchayats* any more. She visits no one, and no one invites her" (The Sacrifice, np). Being a peasant despite of its economic disadvantages was a respectable occupation in the feudal Indian society. Girdhari chose to end his life over becoming a labourer. To him being a labourer seemed worse than death; through his musings, Premchand provides a micro–cosmic view of the power relations existing in the rural society:

After long years of a free and respectable life, living the life of a labourer seemed worse than death. He was master of a household and till now had been counted amongst the respectable people in the village. He had the right to voice his opinion on matters of the village. He didn't have the wealth but he certainly had a reputation. The village barber, carpenter, water carrier, priest and watchman looked up to him. Now, this respect was gone. Who'd seek his advice now, who'd come to his door for help? (The Sacrifice, np)

These power dynamics in a rural society were directly in favour of the landlords. Due to these power dynamics the peasant sticks to the peasantry to live an honourable life, hence, the nature of such rural society was not capitalistic. This is another reason why the Permanent Settlement Act was an utter fiasco in India as it was modelled on the capitalistic society of Britain. Written during the same phase "A Quarter and One Ser Wheat" critiques the malpractice of bonded labour system or Debt Bondage in colonial India, abolished much later in 1976, the story ends with the peasant Shankar becoming a bonded labour and after his death the serfdom is passed

on to his son. “A Winter’s Night” also has a similar ending, where Halku has no other prospects of paying off the rent but to be reduced to a hired hand after his crop is trampled. The story does not give as elaborate account of the difference between tenant farming and wage labour system as “The Sacrifice”. Perhaps due to the changes in his writings style. “The Sacrifice” and “A Quarter and One Ser Wheat” are written during a time when short story in Hindi was still developing, relying more on the extradiegetic narrator, thus making the stories more descriptive. On the other hand, “A Winter’s Night” uses dialogues more than extradiegetic narration, allowing the characters to present their views on the existing systems, for example Munni says,

I keep telling you, why don’t you leave tenant farming? You work so hard on the fields, yet the money the crop brings in goes into paying back the interest on the loan...you can earn enough to fill your stomach if you take up work as casual labour. (Premchand)

It is through Munni that Premchand shows the downgraded state of farming, making the story more realistic than the early phase stories which had either folkloric beginning like “in a village somewhere, there lived a peasant named Shankar” (A Quarter and One Ser Wheat) or fantastical ending like “Girdhari’s restless spirit haunts the fields. It does not harm anyone, and seems to derive comfort from watching the fields” (The Sacrifice).

Although Premchand represents the issues of peasant but not from the vantage point of a peasant but that of a reformist. Upadhyaya notes “Premchand’s gaze is not consistently that of a peasant. Particularly in his journalistic writings he tends to see peasants and their problems from a middle– class reformist perspective, and there is a certain continuity in this regard” (Moral economy, 1229). A childlike innocence is a central trait in the characterisation of Premchand’s peasants. Girdhari in “The Sacrifice” is this “dehaati” simple, irrational and unrefined peasant. He is too much rooted in his emotional attachment with the land that he is not able to make a rational decision for his survival. “His fields were his life... the names he had given his fields flowed off his tongue as easily as the name of his three children. One was Chaubiso, another Bayiso; one he called Nalewala, the other Talaiyawala” (Sacrifice, np). A similar representation can be seen in “A Quarter and One Ser Wheat”, where Shankar is a childlike innocent peasant and “the usual earthly wisdom of treachery, trickery and loot were still unknown to him” (129).

“The Sacrifice” and “A Quarter and One Ser Wheat” belong to the early phase of his literary career, the peasant in these stories exhibits a strong sense of emotional attachment with his land, which fades away as one moves to the writings of last phase like in “A Winter’s Night” and “Kafan”.

“The Sacrifice” not only represents the economic equation between the land and the peasant but also the emotional relation between the two, while in “A Winter’s Night” the tragedy gives Halku a sense of relief that he would finally be able to sleep. Gulzaar in “Living with Premchand” calls “A Winter’s Night” a “Chekhovian story” (123). I believe he must have compared “A Winter’s Night” with “Sleepy”. “The Sacrifice” is narrated by an extra– diegetic narrator, the third person narration and the fantastical touch of the spirit of Girdhari after his death make the story different from the advanced realism of his later phase writing like “A Winter’s Night”, in which the story proceeds through dialogues more than narration.

The Post – Independence Era: Peasant after Premchand

Shifting from the colonial to post– Independence era, the peasant is still depicted in the same fashion of romanticism, but the form witnesses many experiments during this era. Bhisham Sahni's "Jot" was published in the short story collection *Bhagya Rekha* (1953). Despite of his criticism of the movement, Bhisham Sahni is associated with the *Nayi Kahani* (New story) movement, the *Nayi Kahani* stories were more focused on experiential realism. Sahni's stories depict the economic, social, and political disenchantment in independent India. "Jot" is narrated by an extra– diegetic narrator; it represents the peasants' struggle in the hilly regions, due to this factor the story becomes more significant in the repository of peasant– centred narratives in Hindi as the majority of the peasant narratives are set in plains.

The protagonist is a small peasant named Janaku whose field is described as a small piece of land on the hills, situated in a corner, secluded, due to which his crops are deprived of adequate sunlight and take longer than others. The story depicts a small peasant's distress and struggles to save his small field and only source of earning. The story exposes the corrupt bureaucratic system in the post– independence era and how only a minuscule change came for the small peasants after the British left. Janaku seeks help from the Patwari, Forest Ranger and God, though all in vain. Instead of helping Janaku, the Patwari asks him to offer one goat to appease God and the Ranger, for his benefit, gets some rocks thrown from above so the road would break and he would get the contract to build it. The Patwari and the Ranger are corrupt and misuse their power to their own advantage. Unlike Premchand's stories, the *Nayi Kahani* characters are not static but dynamic, their corruption is revealed gradually and not established by the narrator in the beginning of the story. The Ranger has destroyed Janaku's field on purpose is revealed only at the end of the story. Moreover, during this period, the short story genre flourished in Hindi, developed completely and ready for experiments, evident in *Nayi Kahani*, which takes a modern take emphasising "on the virtues and vices of a character's psychology, and even more on the character's feelings and moods" (Sahni). "Jot" depicts the psychological chaos, dilemma of the peasant in crisis focusing on the events as experienced by him, for example, while going to the Ranger's house, the road was divided into two parts, one way towards the *jot* (the hilltop where God's temple is) and the other to the Ranger's house, Sahni's depiction of Janaku's dilemma is rich both visually (silver earrings, rain, darkness) and phonetically (the echo of Patwari's voice), he uses the motif of a dividing road to represent the small peasant's state of helplessness and mental dilemma. These detailed visuals distinguish Sahni's realism from Premchand's. Premchand's realism is rich in satire but straightforward on the other hand, Sahni makes the reader experience the small peasant's helpless state through experiential realism, emphasising on the character's mental state, feelings and moods, which are crucial traits of the "*Nayi Kahani*" movement.

In Sahni's story, the peasant also becomes the focalizer at many points for example, Sahni's depiction of the destruction of Janaku's field and his death is very cinematic, where Janaku's fear of God takes different shapes in his mind almost like a schizophrenic person, the reader sees the rolling rocks through Janaku's focalization, the rocks look like a giant wrathful God with many hands throwing them down on his field. Despite the landsliding of his field and his body being exhausted to the bone, he desperately tries to collect the little wheat he could, "*veh abhi marna nahi chahta tha... kisan tha, anaj se prem karta tha!*" through these last lines, Sahni like Premchand, depicts the relationship between a peasant and his land beyond materialism. Lastly, "Jot" establishes the lack of change in the condition of peasant and land

relations in the post– Independence era. The image of peasant meets the same romanticisation as earlier. The innocent peasant, as helpless as before meets a tragic end, like in the colonial era. Neither the state of peasant nor the plot has changed in this period, the only change witnessed is in the style of writing in the repository of Hindi narratives on peasant.

1970s – *Janvadi Kahani*

The real breakthrough in the image of the peasant comes during the “*Janvadi Kahani*” Movement (The Democratic Story) of the 1970s. “*Janvadi Kahani*” made a departure from the preceding literary movements in Hindi fiction. It rejected the experiential realism of “*Nayi Kahani*” movement of the 1950s and equipped itself with Marxist ideology; with this movement, the Hindi short stories once again shifted to the village settings. The peasants, unlike earlier, have the awareness of their exploitation accompanied by a spirit of rebellion. For this movement, I have selected two short stories: “*Ashad ka ek Din*” by Jawahar Singh and “*Sadak*” by Jagjit Dixit. The two stories document the plight of the landless peasant. The stories add another layer of intersecting identity to the peasant’s identity, the landless peasant in both of the stories belong to the Dalit community. According to G.S. Bhalla’s study, “the landless labour, generally, belonged to the lowest in the caste hierarchy and acutely suffered from both economic and social oppression” (Bhalla, 42).

Despite several land reforms and peasant movements by the 1970s in postcolonial India, the condition of the landless peasant barely improved. The two stories dig at the failure of several government schemes for landless peasants. The government implemented the Land Ceiling Act in 1972, which set a limit to the maximum land one can own. Under this act, the surplus land is captured and redistributed among the landless labourers. According to the “draft sixth five– year plan, as on July 31, 1977, the estimated surplus area was 2.15 million hectares, the area declared surplus was only 1.63 million hectares, and the area actually distributed was only 0.52 million hectares” (Bhalla, 43). “*Ashad ka ek Din*” opens with the first rain of ‘*ashad*’ (July), narrated by an extra– diegetic narrator, the readers are given the inside view of the protagonist’s mud house with leaking roof, establishing the poor living conditions of the hardworking landless farmers. The protagonist Bhagelu is a landless Harijan farmer, a crop– sharer in the farms of the upper– caste landowner Hirasingh. In the “*Janvadi Kahani*”, the characterisation of the peasant undergoes a significant change. Unlike earlier, the peasant is no more a romanticized figure. Bhagelu, being a “*janvadi*” story protagonist, is aware of the landlord's exploitation of his community’s farmers. The distinction between fine grain and coarse grain is present in this story too, like that of Premchand’s, but here the peasant is aware of the exploitation, Bhagelu says, “*babu bhaiya log*” (the landowners) eat fine grains like rice and wheat while we are given coarse grains like corns and sweet potatoes”. The peasant is not hegemonized like in “The Sacrifice”, “A Quarter and One Ser Wheat” and “*Jot*”.

The “*Janvadi*” story movement was influenced by the Naxalbari Peasant revolt of 1967; the spirit of rebellion and revenge marked the undertones of these stories. Bhagelu has also developed interest and faith in the socialist ‘struggle’; he says, “*in logo se sangharas kar k khet chhinana padega*” (we will have to snatch the land from them by struggle).

Set in Bihar, the story delineates a realistic picture of the impact of land reforms in Bihar. G.S. Bhalla writes, “in permanently settled Gangetic plains of Bihar and Orissa, despite the land reforms, the land relations have continued to remain semi– feudal for a very long time, and

upper caste absentee landowners have continued to enjoy great power and decisive economic and political influence” (51). The story shows land relations and the complex intertwining of caste and class in Bihar. The deeply rooted caste hegemony has led to serious crimes in Bihar, like the burning of villages and murders at the behest of semi– feudal interests; the tragic death of the protagonist Bhagelu is the prime example of the same. He is murdered at the end of the story by the upper– caste landlord Hirasingh in whose field Bhagelu has worked as a sharecropper. The landholders in the story belong to the upper caste, i.e. Thakurs and the landless peasants working as sharecroppers belong to the lower– caste, i.e. leatherworkers. The story records the tension of the impending Land Ceiling Act in the 1970s and how the desperate Landowners fear losing power over the landless lower– caste peasants. The power structure is twofold, it consists of both class and caste since, under the Land Ceiling Act, the captured land was to be redistributed to the lower– class landless peasants who majorly belonged to the lower caste; it was a threat to the power structure, which so far nourished the exploitative landholder class.

Like “Ashad ka ek Din” Jagjit Dixit’s “*Sadak*” is also a *Janvadi Kahani* documenting the ground reality of the Land Ceiling Act. “*Sadak*” opens with a piece of news that under a government policy, all the landless peasants and sharecroppers would be provided land of their own. The news brings a wave of naïve optimism in the lower– caste leatherworker congregation. The story is a critique of government, caste system and capitalism. It exposes how the doubly marginalised, uneducated lower– caste leatherworker community is exploited by the upper– caste *Thakurs*. The story exposes how the benefits of government policies made for the upliftment of the marginalised peasant do not reach them. The exploitation of the peasant due to lack of education has existed in the peasant narratives since the colonial time. In postcolonial India, the peasant still does not have access to education and is exploited due to that lack. The story presents education as means to exploitation instead of empowerment in the hands of the ruling class. In the story, the victory of the educated over the uneducated is depicted through legal documents (related to the crops, land and tax) presented in the court, where the “shining” signatures of the landholder Thakurs had substituted the thumbprints of the landless “leatherworkers”. So, their applications are rejected, and they are left at the mercy of the *Thakurs*, once again.

The story is rich in satire, it satirically comments upon the schemes of government “*sarkar jab bhi koi kanoon banati hai usme chhota sa chhed zarur rakhti hai, jisme se hathi nikal jata hai*” [whenever the government brings some policy, it always keeps a small loophole, small enough to let an elephant pass through it]. The “leatherworker” community has a particular significance in the village as the vote bank for the upper castes; they are reduced to a figure of “one hundred and twenty– seven” votes, objectified by both the Thakurs and the Brahmins, to win the election. They are further dehumanised by Thakur Hardev Singh as “cheap labour” for his upcoming road project and, therefore he gets their crops set on fire and goes to the Dalit farmers, focalised by the Dalit peasants in the story, Thakur Hardev Singh appears as a “father figure” who “forgives” the mistakes of his children and once again embraces them. The deeply rooted hegemony is projected through the lower caste peasants’ fear of upper caste landowners for the “apparent” betrayal of them by applying for the “land scheme”. From the beginning of the story, the crop– sharer peasants are shown as naïve, uneducated and fearful of the landowners, but by the end of the story, they break through the

hegemony. Their faith in the landowners is shattered by the knowledge that their crops were set on fire by the Thakurs, they show their rebellion through destructing the road they had constructed. This rebellion is a marker of the “*Janvadi Kahani*” movement. The story ends with the breakdown of the deep– rooted hegemony, both Thakur Hardev Singh and Brahmin Vrindavan Pathak are shocked and stunned by the revolt of the landless Dalit peasants. Coming to the use of the Hindi language, during this period, the writers are switching back to more regional varieties of Hindi. Preceding movements like *Nayi Kahani*, *Samantar Kahani* and *Sachetan Kahani* have made use of standard Hindi. The “*Janvadi Kahani*” movement rejects the standardization of the Hindi language, for instance, “*Ashad ka ek din*” uses idioms from Bhojpuri like “*chorva k man base tarbuja k khet me*”, and the narrator of “*Sadak*” opens the story in the style of a “story– teller”, Indianizing the short story genre “*shehar se udi thi khabar. Akhbar me chhapi thi khabar. Sarkari thi khabar, iss liye sacchi thi khabar*”.

Conclusion

The select stories depict a shift in the portrayal of the image of the peasant in Hindi short story from colonial to postcolonial era, caste being the subtheme, these stories represent how a caste based hierarchal social system ensures poor living conditions and lower status for the peasants in the society forever. The stories also show a change in the form and structure over the decades from *Pragatisheel* to *Janvadi*. The writers document the failing systems of their respective times like the Permanent Settlement Act and the Land Ceiling Act. In all the stories, land and labour play a crucial role, be it crop– sharing or tenant farming. The protagonists of the stories, despite exhausting themselves to the bone, are trapped in a never– ending web of poverty.

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Short Biographical Note

Ms. Barkha is a PhD Scholar in Department of English, University of Delhi. Her research interests include Modern Hindi Short Story, Absurdism, Gastro-Criticism, Modern British Literature, Bhasa Literature and Dalit Literature.