



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A DISCOURSE ON CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN PREMCHAND'S *KARMABHUMI*

Vijay C. Thange

Associate Professor, Department of English

K. J. Somaiya College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Kopergaon Dist. Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract: *Karmabhumi* is one of the most influential novels of Premchand, although the ingredients of the plot are more or less the same as in other novels. It also brings forth the hypocrisy of money lenders and big *zamindars* and landlords, the plight of the untouchables, the high handedness of bureaucracy and the pretending and duality of the self-ruled mahants. There is a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed for their righteous demands and even they are supported by the elite as there is the creation of self-confidence among the untouchables. Premchand's sympathies for the untouchable and downtrodden are exhibited in *Karmabhumi* that it becomes a novel of the socio-economic sufferings of the deprived class section of the society rather than a novel of the Indian national movement for freedom. Premchand had closely followed the Russian revolution and socialist thoughts had preoccupied his way of thinking. Until now, the writers were obsessed with romanticism and the issues of elite household in their writings. The untouchables, labouring classes, have never been discussed in the writings of these upper-caste writers. For the first time, Premchand brought the issues of haves and have-nots and the conflict between them to the forefront.

Key Words: Moneylenders, *zamindars*, landlords, oppressor, oppressed, sufferings, socialist, writings, conflict, poor, rich, peasants, etc.

I. Introduction

In all his major works from *Sevasadan* (1919) to *Godaan* (1936), Premchand dealt with class conflict issues between the poor and rich vis-à-vis the national freedom movement. In the colonial rule, peasants remained illiterate because of the devoid of formal educational institutions. The result was ignorance and lack of accessibility with the rest of the world and as a result, they became vulnerable to the unjust demands of *zamindars* and landlords. At the time of *Karmabhumi* (1931-32), there was a significant slump in agricultural products' prices, and the peasants would hardly get one meal a day.

The Exploitation of the Tenant Farmers by *Zamindars*

In *Karmabhumi*, Premchand came back vigorously with the question of peasants. Around that time in India, there was a great slump in India's prices of agricultural products and the result was horrible. The peasants could not get one full meal a day. Amarkant thinks of his bread and butter after landing in a village; at that time, he was told by Payag the abject condition of farmers:

Farming is a tricky business; avoid it. It does not matter whether your field produces anything or not; as a tenant farmer, you still have to pay the rent. You are faced with one or other calamity all the time, hail or frost, drought or flood. (129)

Tenant farmers were living a life of wretchedness and sometimes the cost of the produce did not equal the rent which has to be paid by the cultivator to the *zamindar*. "Cursing their fate, remaining naked and starved and dying like dogs, people continued to till the fields. What else could they do? Many had migrated to the cities and taken up employment there. Many others had taken to wage labour. However, there still was no dearth of tenants. In a predominantly agricultural country, farming is not merely a means of earning a livelihood; it is also a status symbol."¹

Premchand started believing the leadership of educated urban non-Kisan leaders and described the mutual jealousies for power and leadership. In *Karmabhumi*, there is a rivalry between Amarkant and Atmanand over the leadership of peasants. The former is moderate, and the latter is an extremist in his stand against the Mahant and government authorities. In this regard, Geetanjali Pandey says:

In view of Premchand's practice of drawing his main characters from real life, it could be reasonable speculation that these two protagonists represent the congress and the Kisan Sabha positions. That Atmananda, the fictional representation of peasant leaders, had eventually accepted the dominance of Amarkant would suggest a literary replication of the actual dominance of the congress over the Kisan Sabhas.²

The 1920s saw great upheavals in Kisan Sabha and ultimately led towards their militancy against the *zamindars*, the immediate oppressors, and not against the government, the distant oppressor. The congress was of the view that the movement should go with non-co-operation and non-violence way, but Kisan Sabha was of the view that they will not get anything through these ways, and congress is very timid to lead the way to success.

Mahant, a landlord, was not the sympathizer of tenant farmers; he could levy as much tax as he liked and the poor tenants had to pay it without saying anything. In many cases, the farm tax had risen so high that the entire crop was not sufficient to meet it. However, the people, bemoaning their late, hungry and naked, dying miserable deaths, still kept cultivating the farms. (148)

On several occasions, Mahant looted people under the religious pretext and tenants had to comply with their demands. Swami Atmanand and Amarkant had created much awareness among the tenants and Atmanand had been elected as the chairman of the panchayat board. Both these leaders united tenant farmers against the unjust tax. Bhola Chaudhary puts forth the condition of tenants and throws some light on the lavishness of Mahant Maharaj. He says:

... I can swear by mother Ganges that in my house, there is not even an ounce of grain. There was a mango fest for a thousand sadhus. We die of starvation, but they gorge on cream; for all this, the blood is being sucked out of our bodies. (250)

The Mahant and his people exploit the tenant farmers that they have now renounced the fear of this landlord and come nearly out on Mahant. Algoo, the weaver, also says that there is no use in going to Mahant. He rules with an iron hand. If he gets angry, he will have us beaten up." (250) Still, Amar visits Mahant, but it could not solve the problem. After filing the petition by Amar, Mahant wrote to the government for a fifty percent waiver in the taxes, and the proposal was stuck down in the government's red-tapism.

Struggle Against Bureaucracy

Karmabhumi was written under the colonial rule between 1929 and 1931 and was published in 1932. The colonial administrative set up was based on land revenue. The government was continually extending the old forms of taxation and exploring new ones. The struggle against bureaucracy is one of the recurring themes in *Karmabhumi*. In the city, it is for the demand of land for the construction of houses of the lower caste people such as sweepers, *chamars*, maidservants, etc. whereas, in the rural area, it is for the tax cut. There is one more incident of struggle against bureaucracy and that is of Munni, a poor Rajput woman, raped by British soldiers. The untouchables were asserting their rights in the villages and at the same time, workers in the city had waged their struggle against the municipal board on the issue of housing colony.

Amarkant, in the village, had started creating awareness among the people about their bad habits and their oppression through the hands of Brahmins and one particular *zamindar*, Mahant. He was living his life lavishly and putting its burden on the tenant farmers in the form of tax. This movement against land tax is now joined by swami Atmanand, a fierce fighter and a great orator. Amarkant was moderate in his approach and pleaded for restraint, but Atmanand advocated aggression. Amarkant opposed the ways adopted by Atmanand. When Atmanand puts forth the extreme method of surrounding Mahant's home and Thakurdwara, Amarkant arbitrates the matter and says that:

The path you are taking is not the path of redemption; it is the path of destruction. If your ox is sick, then would you harness it for ploughing? (251)

The people remained silent and united, but the government's repression made them restless. Meanwhile, Amarkant's friend, Salim, now an ICS officer, has been deputed in the same district where Amar works and has been assigned the post of Depute Magistrate. He has been deputed by the chief officer Ghaznavi to deal with the situation. Salim arrested Amarkant and put him in jail. The tenant farmer's aggression and the government's repression resulted in a clash, and several people died in the firing by the police, and several others were arrested. Amarkant says, "This is our *dharmayuddha* (war), and our victory depends on renunciation, sacrifice and truth." (281)

Lala Samarkant, until the staunch supporter of the haves, now deeply moved to witness the abject condition of the farmers and scolds Salim for his loyalty to the foreign government. Salim, in the feet of rage, hit the old woman, Saloni, with his crop so hard many times that she is almost dead. Saloni spat on the face of Salim. Samarkant takes Salim to the village again and mediates between Salim and the villagers and sees that the accord is struck between them and Salim, with his open eyes, witnesses the oppression and injustice of the villagers, starts changing his attitude towards them. He prepared and sent a report to the state government, describing the real state of affairs. He genuinely described the grievances of the people and held police and other officials responsible for the villagers' conflict and death. However, Mr. Ghaznavi, Salim's boss, rejected the reports but Salim, totally fearless, now sent the report directly to the headquarters. Instead of considering the report, the government dismissed Salim from the services by blaming him for abetting the seditious activities. Salim new start working for the villagers and actively participate in the agitation. Salim's successor, Mr. Ghosh, is a cruel and callous officer. Salim objected to the way the government's handling the issue. He says:

The government is for the people, and people are not for the government. If the government wishes to survive by oppressing the farmers, by killing them with hunger, then, at last, I will opt out of it. (315)

Mr. Ghosh came on high handedly upon the poor farmers and decided to auction the animals to the butchers. Meanwhile, the policemen started firing and beating the poor folk. Unable to bear this, Salim antagonised Mr. Ghosh and there was a scuffle between them. Salim was arrested and put in the Lucknow jail. Amarkant and his other friends also have been lodged in Lucknow jail. Finally, the government had to step back and had to concede many demands of the tenant farmers, which, according to them, were responsible for their misery and unhappiness.

Struggle Against the Municipal Board for Acquiring Land

Sukhada's changed attitude towards Harijans brings her into the fray of agitation for entry in the temple for lower caste people. The upper caste people, mostly Brahmins, were against the untouchables and were beating the Harijans cruelly who dared to attend a religious meeting where *Katha* (passages from religious scriptures) was being recited. It was the opinion of Brahmins that the untouchables had no right to listen to *Vedic* Hymns. Sukhada leads the *satyagraha* and finally, Brahmins and Lala Samarkant had to give in and declare that *mandir* is open to all and Harijans also are free to attend *Katha* and they can also offer prayers inside the temple. While Amarkant was away, Sukhada came to be regarded as a leader of the untouchables and other lower caste people. She became one of the important public figures and started delivering speeches on various social issues. She was called for various functions to attend and walked length and breadth of the city. She saw dark narrow lanes in the city where fresh air and light never penetrated. (187). There were working children of India, downtrodden and miserable, who were struggling to seize a short existence from the jaws of death. (187)

Sukhada identified the reason for the misery of the untouchables, lower caste people and concluded that houses should be constructed for this lower-class section of the society. She decided the project be built on the land of the Municipal Board.

The Municipal Board was not willing to handle such a large project (204). Hafiz Halim and Lala Dhaniram were the chairman and vice-chairman of the board, respectively. They were not the sympathizer of the poor and considered this issue negligible. Sukhada could not understand why the Municipality, which provided lands for mills, schools and colleges, could not donate the land for poor people's housing projects. Dr. Shantikumar also joined her and came with some plans for the project. Even Lala Samarkant was also ready to invest some amount of money in this project. Sukhada tightens the grip of the strike in the city and now there was a sizable number of people involved in the strike in the city. Not a single sweeper was working. The kahars and ikkawalahas had also stopped work. More than half the vegetable shops were closed. The police were trying to have the shops reopened and to encourage sweepers to return to work. The city officials were considering ways to solve the problem and the rich and wealthy in the city were collaborating with them. (231)

The police department had decided to arrest Sukhada and the Chaudharies (The heads of all lower castes) as a repression tactic. Sukhada was lodged in the Lucknow jail, where Munnin has also been lodged. Pathanin, an old woman and a wife of the watchman of Lala Samarkant, is now much enlightened by the thoughts of houses for the poor and fiercely fighting against the governments' repressive tactics and Municipal Board's biased attitude towards working-class people. Pathanin has also been arrested now and put in jail. Her arrest caused great upheaval in the city. Lala Samarkant, who was indifferent to the strike of the poor people for their just demand of houses, couldn't keep himself away, especially after the arrest of his daughter-in-law Sukhada. Amarkant, his son, is also in Lucknow jail. He thought of the betterment of the poor and there was a tremendous change in his personality; a complete transformation. He says, "The day will come when houses for the poor will be constructed at this very place." (326) Lala Samarkant has also been arrested under the charge of abetting violence among the people and now it is the turn of Renuka Devi, who donated all her money and belongings to the school, to lead the movement.

Renuka Devi guides the workers assembled there and says that every inch of its land is yours. You are the true rulers of this city. However, very soon, she is also arrested and while she is on the way to police, she says:

Brothers, I am leaving, but my application is in front of you. You must teach a lesson to this plundering Municipality so that it does not dare to trample on the poor. If anyone treads on you, become a thorn and prick him in his foot. (329)

Naturally, after the arrest of Renuka Devi, Dr. Shantikumar takes the change of strike and leads them. He appeals to all the workers to go on strike and remain united in this crucial period. He makes them aware of their sufferings, hardship, starvation and pain. Shantikumar differentiates knowledge as:

Such knowledge (wealth created by the pursuit of knowledge) is called selfish knowledge. When a society is based on selfish knowledge instead of just knowledge, then you must understand that society faces an impending revolution. (313)

The agitators are just deliberating that only the rich do not have the right over land, light and air; a society that has no place for its poor is like a house without a foundation. The police also arrest Shantikumar, and the mob is now worried about their leadership; to whom to look at was the question in front of the masses. At this juncture, Naina joined the battlefield. She is the daughter of Lala Samarkant, sister of Amarkant, sister-in-law of Sukhada, and she is the daughter-in-law of Lala Dhaniram, to whom the people are fighting for their just demands. She was inclined to distance herself from the movement so that her in-laws might have no cause to feel dissatisfied, but after hearing of these arrests, she could not restrain herself. (332)

Naina fearlessly admits that her father-in-law has purchased several acres of land and if she insists, instead of building bungalows for the rich, he would have houses for the poor constructed. But she questions the right of the rich over land and accuses the Municipality. She says,

The land belonging to the village farmers was grabbed for a pittance, and today the same land is being sold at a premium so that bungalows for the powerful and the rich can be built. We ask the architects of our city, is it only the rich who are alive? Are the poor not living beings? Is it only the rich that have a right to a healthy life? Do the poor not need good health? (333)

Naina asks the power to the poor people and deliberates that the day is not far away when poor people will be in positions of power. The Russian revolution profoundly influenced Premchand. He was very much sure that the day will also come to India when peasants, lower caste people and workers will grab power and will have good days in their lives. Naina took a flag in her hand and started marching towards the municipal office. More than twenty to twenty-five thousand people marched after her. This crowd did not seem like an undisciplined mob but like disciplined columns of an army.

The municipality board members got horrified and even the Deputy Superintendent of Police was frightened and asked for a permission of police firing. The police officer thought that the procession was not likely to withdraw without firing. An urgent meeting was summoned of the board members and voting was taken about firing. It was passed with 12 votes in support and ten people against it. Lala Dhaniram remained neutral. The Board permitted the police department the use the tool of firing if required.

When the procession was marching towards the Municipality, Maniram stood in front of his wife, Naina and confronted her and shot at her, resulting her death.

The board members sympathized with Lala Dhaniram for losing his daughter-in-law through the hands of his son. Lala Dhaniram told the board members that if you genuinely sympathized with me, then authorize me to tell the people that the Board had given land to them. The board members, somehow hesitatingly, agreed with Dhaniram and decided to hand over the land to the poor people for their houses.

The procession was marching with Naina's dead body; her death had made them unconquerable and indivisible. Hafiz Halim, the chairman of the Municipality Board, declared the decision as:

The Board has today unanimously agreed to give the entire plot of land to you people... Today the Board acknowledges that the health, comfort, and needs of the poor are matters of greater concern than the pleasures, desires, and greed of the rich. The Board has recognized that the poor have greater rights over these things than do the rich. (337)

Conclusion

Tenants were at the mercy of *zamindars* and Premchand had declared the abolition of the *zamindari* system in his earlier novel '*Premashram*' and *Purana Zamana: Naya Zamana*. Earlier, he had faith in *zamindars*' individual benevolence, but in *Karmabhumi*, he had no hopes of goodness from *zamindar*. In the fight against Mahant, Atmanand, a militant leader, earlier chief officer of the Ashram and now moved away from the city to settle in the village, asks the villagers not to go to Mahant, a corrupt religious leader, and beg for the waiver of taxes; it will be a futile exercise. However, he asks villagers to adopt an aggressive way by going to Mahant's house and surround it and his Thakurdwara and let not take any festivity until he revokes the taxes altogether. He supports his argument with logical statements.

References:

- [1] Sudhir Chandra, *Premchand: A Historiographic View*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 15 (Apr 11, 1981) 669-675.
- [2] Geetanjali Pandey *Premchand and the Peasantry: Constrained Radicalism*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 18, No. 26 (Jun 25, 1983) 1149-1155.

