

Challenging the spatial constraints: The case of 'Sarpdانش' and 'Thakur ka Kuan'

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Abstract

This article explores the depiction of the oppressor and oppressed relationship with special reference to literature written in Hindi. Oppression and exploitation are a part of almost every society, with both sides having an unsaid claim to their respective regions, which are seldom crossed. Such a setting that has been contested for centuries often finds its portrayal in literary works of art. The demarcation of the space allocated to the people belonging to upper and lower caste in a village along with the restrictions and constraints practiced on the poor results in their insubordination. The article discusses the narratives that depict the subjugated challenging the authority for justice and equality, taking keen focus on their quest to attain spatial equality.

Keywords: space, uprising, caste, authority, justice, equality, superstition

Introduction

The realm of Indian prose literature consists of intricately woven tales representing social and economic realities of the country. Indian Literature gradually developed with the writers raising their voice against the British and attempting to appeal to the people to function as a united whole, with nationalist fervor prevailing in their works. In the decades that followed, a parallel trend of unity that project itself in the works of various writers can be noticed. V.K.R.V Rao writes about the different Indian languages in their treatment of peasant-landlord relationships in the sympathy extended to the exploited and under-privileged, and in the description of the rural masses with their backwardness, superstition, privation and penury (1029)

Such traits are spun alive in Ramdarash Mishra's 'Sarpdانش', which begins in *medias res* with the protagonist, Gokul, having been bitten by a snake, treated by Bhawani Baba, *mantrik*. Superstition can easily be traced in twines that structure and thrive in every civilization. The existence of supernatural belief is ubiquitous and has existed since time immemorial and they have been represented vividly in various literatures. The villagers, steeped deeply in the charms of superstitious belief, chose to have him treated by Bhawani Baba rather than a practicing physician. For they believe that it is the chanting of *mantras* that will save the life of the poor peasant rather than medicines.

Is jamaane mein bhi doctor ki dava na karaakar maantrik se vish utaravaane ki kriya haasyapad hi nahin, khataranaak bhi kahi jaayegi. Kintu meelon tak is ilaake mein na koi aspataal hai, na doctor^[1].

Not only would it be considered ridiculous to be treated by the *mantrik* rather than a physician, at these times, but it would be rather dangerous too. But there was no hospital facility or doctor available within the radius of a few miles. (Mishra 58)

It is not just blind faith that should be blamed for this

decision, but also, the lack of facilities that result in the villagers' choosing the *mantrik* who was easily accessible for the treatment. The *mantrik*, for the people, is the only hope they have and they trust him, and he trusts his *mantras*. As the news spreads, other inhabitants of the village assemble around Gokul and Bhawani Baba to watch the spectacle. Among the *harijan* audience, the caste Hindus also stand amass, commenting every now and then on the wounded Gokul. Gokul is looked down upon and blamed for what he has to undergo. One may note the drawing of the peasant-landlord relationship shaping its way in the narrative, as it is pointed out that Gokul must have been stealing from the fields.

'Lekin yah Gokula itni raat gaye khet ki mend par kya karane gaya tha. Jaroor khet mein chori karane gaya hoga. Arey, yah jahaan padha tha, vah to pradhan ka khet hai. Arey, yah saala to janm ka chor hai.'

'But why had Gokul gone to the field-ridge at night? He must have gone to steal something from the fields. Arre, he was found lying in the Pradhan's field. He has been stealing since childhood.' (Mishra 58)

Gokul, a marginalized labourer is treated with distrust and contempt while undergoing such excruciating pain. The onlookers have lack of sympathy for Gokul, a lower class, and lower caste labourer. With the arrival of his family, Gokul overcomes the pain and attempts to recover, which is anticipated by the superstitious crowd as sign of Bhawani Baba's *mantra*'s working. It is only after Gokul recovers that he begins to introspect why he chose to stay put and not raise an alarm after being bitten. This familiarises the reader to Gokul's plight; his being a poor, lower caste labourer who is caught in the web of exploitation by the mighty landlords. It is abject poverty and being under-privileged, with a small piece of barren land that makes Gokul enter the spatial territory that he is not allowed to enter, i.e. field of the *pradhan* and pluck the cobs.

The dismantling of the factors of exploitation, which is employed by writers that represent the lived experience in

¹ All translations have been done by the researcher

various Dalit narratives, presents itself with Gokul being summoned by the *pradhan* along with the verbal spat that followed. The works of Ramdarash Mishra are well known for presenting a realistic image of the rural and urban life of India. His literary journey has passed through many turns of life and grown every time with a new image. His works intricately describe the real face of rural India, with their problems, diversity, simplicity of the rural people, agony of the common people of the villages living with hardship and pain. He also deals with values of our society and exploitation by the rich and mighty. In the recent times, literature often seems to portray a sense of unity in terms of the treatment of the relationship between the landlords and the peasants. The writers create a sympathetic outlook towards the people belonging to the exploited section of society.

Such an outlook also seeks to focus on the features of the rural masses “with their backwardness, superstition, privation and penury” (Rao 1029). The angst with which the masses are depicted is done with a unified perspective viz-a-viz the issues covered, irrespective of the manner or language these issues are raised in.

Mishra also narrates that the villager *Gokul* was unhappy with his life because of his abject poverty and his inability to feed his own family, which he considered his prime duty, which is why he had become hopeless and wanted to end his life in depression. This was one of the reasons for Gokul’s feeling of contentment after having been bitten by the poisonous snake.

Jab saanp ne use kaata to use achchha laga- chalo is narkeey jeevan ka ant hua aur saanp ki dava karaane ya jhadavaane ke lie bhaaga nahin balki khet ki mend par hi let gaya. He liked it when the snake bit him; it was like a sigh of relief for him since it meant an end to the hellish life he lived. He chose to lie at the field’s ridge rather than run for a medical or superstition based remedy (Mishra 58).

Once Gokul had been healed, Mishra allows the reader to peep into the thoughts of Gokul, where he is pondering over his love for his family and how he can put a stop to the menace. He recalls the events of the night,

Kayi din se khaana nahin mila. Maine socha, raat ko pradhan ke khet se makke ki baaliyaan tod laun. Huh! Pradhan ka khet!

We had nothing to eat for days, so I thought of getting some maize cobs from the *pradhan*’s field. Huh! *Pradhan*’s field! (Mishra 60)

Gokul contemplating about the reason behind his going to the *pradhan*’s field allows one to understand the truth behind his ‘theft’. Gokul had been given that field by the *pradhan* during the ploughing. Gokul’s meticulous toil in the field reaped benefits for him in term of good crops, which made the *pradhan* want Gokul’s fields. The *pradhan* took Gokul’s field and gave him a barren land instead, which resulted in Gokul’s economic loss along with him spiraling downwards into poverty.

One may note a similar treatment of the poor and lower caste by the feudal lords in Premchand’s ‘*Thakur ka Kuan*’ in the conversation between Gangi and Jokhu when they discuss the consequence of trespassing the spatial

boundaries of their caste in order to draw water from the wells of the caste Hindus.

‘Haath-paanv tudava aaei aur kuchh na hoga. Baith chupake se. Brahmin devata aashirvaad denge, Thakur laathi maaregen, Sahuji ek paanch lenge. Gareebi ka dard kaun samajhta hai!’

‘You will gain nothing out of that and only have your hands and feet battered. Sit still! The Brahmin dieties will bless us, the Thakurs will beat us, and the Sahuji will over charge us. No one bothers about the plight of the poor!’ (1)

This discussion of the penalties for simply going to a well to get some water for her ailing husband shows how the poor are often forced to abstain from certain areas that are to be common for everyone but cannot simple due to the unexplained space allocations for the upper and lower castes. Further amplifying how they are overlooked in society; their pain rendered insignificant. The powerful deem them irrelevant and they find it superfluous to deal with the petty concerns of the poor. However, Gangi chooses to trespass the borders that confine them to a destitute land, which does not have basic amenities like water. The text further explores how Gangi attempts to claim equality and justice by confronting the spatial boundaries when she, after some thought, proceeds with collecting water from the well that ‘belongs’ to the Thakur.

Gangi ka vidrohi dil rivaaji paabandiyon aur majabooriyon par chotein karane laga-hum kyon neech hain aur ye log kyon oochain hain... chori yah karen, jaal-phareb yah karen, jhoothe mukadamein ye karein. Abhi is Thakur ne to us din bechaare gadariye ki bhed churali thi aur baad me maarakar kha gaya. Inheen Pandit ke ghar mein to baarahon maas jua hota hai. Yahi Sahuji toh ghee mein tel milaakar bechte hain.

Gangi’s rebellious heart was hurt with the perpetration of the restrictions and compulsions that her lot had to face- why are we considered inferior and they superior... They steal; they attempt fraud and commit to false cases. Recently, the Thakur had stolen the sheep of a poor shepherd, to kill and eat; the Pandits gamble in their houses every day, and the Sahuji sells ghee adulterated with oil. (Premchand 2)

The crimes mentioned in Premchand’s text are not merely limited to the caste Hindus not sharing water from their wells, rather it shows how they engage in other petty crimes like stealing cattle, gambling and adulteration of goods. The rising agitation that Gangi carries due to her being exploited by the oppressors finds its vent through her resolution to go collect water from the Thakur’s well; the well that has been demarked as the space that caters to only the higher castes. It presents a glance into the lives of the downtrodden, similar to the appalling conduct the characters, primarily Gokul, in ‘*Sarpdandh*’ are subjected to by the hands of the powerful.

It is impertinent to note that Gokul was aware about the treatment meted out by *pradhan* to seize his land but he lacked the courage to confront the *pradhan*, but it was different this time and he wished to settle the issue once and for all. Gokul, after having been levelled charges for stealing crops from the *pradhan*’s lands, began his counter

arguments. Being countered by the lower caste villager whom he considered his bonded labour, the *pradhan* lost his temper, resulting in his assaulting Gokul along with his men, resulting in his death.

Nevertheless, to the *pradhan's* surprise, Gokul was fed-up of being treated that way and he had already decided that he wanted to end his miseries once and for all. The hunger and cry of his son gave him the courage to stand against the injustice and exploitation of the poor by rich. He decided,

'Main jaoonga, main apne parivaar ke liye jaunga. Jis khet ko maine apne paseene se seencha hai uski phasal kaatunga. Yah phasal meri hai. main dusre gaanv ke apane bhaiyon ko jama karunga. Main akela nahin hun.'

'I will go, I will go for my family. I will reap the crops of my hard labour. Those are my crops. I will call others of my caste from the villages nearby to raise their voice against this bias. I am not alone' (Mishra 60)

However, this attempt of seeking revenge against the atrocities Gokul had faced was shortlived since he was beaten to death, on the *pradhan's* call. His son, however, having been in contact with a politician from a nearby village ran towards his residence to outcry the murder of his father, so that the forces of the lower exploited caste could unite for vengeance.

The story has very successfully depicted the exploitation of the poor in the village by hands of mighty and rich people. The writer also underlines the problems of the rural India by narrating the agony and pain of the common people and their physical and mental harassment and economic exploitation.

The story also take up in detail the reasons behind this long existing exploitation. 'Sarpdandsh' is an important example of a short story gives the voice to the downtrodden. These people are suffering from the generations but still can't resist against their bad condition. They suffer in the name of caste and sometimes face the hardship of life. Due to the presence of bias in the society and exploitation of the lower caste, who are unable to earn enough to feed themselves and their Families. Ramdarash Mishra has very successfully dealt with the issue and shown the changes coming in the villages. He also pointed out the organised movements of activist working in the rural India too and organising their community against any kind of exploitation. Gokul represents the lives of the common people of the rural areas and raises his voice against the mighty. His son is the perfect example of the change when he sets off to the nearby village to reclaim his identity in order to advocate his rights of equality and justice, challenging the society that has failed him. Mishra's text displays various developments that shape the struggle in the minds of the under-privileged. Gokul's rejection of the superiority and feeling of entitlement with which the *pradhan* constructs himself is mirrored in his son. His prudent actions of running towards the other village to call members of his caste who can make a difference to counter the rampant feudalism highlights the hope that can be seen in the newer generation. The new generation is shown to emerge with more knowledge and strenght to counter and dismantle the structures that have exploited them for eons.

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