

Mythological and Religious Elements in Premchand's *The Gift of a Cow (Godaan)*

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Abstract

Premchand's *The Gift of a Cow (Godaan)* is a classic of Hindi literature that represents native social system of contemporary India. Along with the misery of the peasant class, the novel explores mythological and religious world of the people in rural part of the country. It refers to the religious beliefs and practices of the people that have been embedded in the psyche of the people. It sketches how religion is used to claim the superiority of one caste over the other castes in Indian society. Premchand exposes the hypocrisy of the religious people and criticizes the blind religiosity of the common people. This paper attempts to unravel the mythical and religious understandings of the characters of the novel and examines how the religious beliefs have affected their lives in reality. It employs the tools of close reading and analysis to find how the native mythological and religious traditions have been reflected in the narrative.

Keywords:

mythology; religion; *Ramayana*; Brahmin; God

Introduction

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The online Collins Dictionary defines “myth” as “a well-known story which was made up in the past to explain natural events or to justify religious beliefs or social customs”. The entry of the word “mythology” in the dictionary says, “mythology is a group of myths, specially all the myths from a particular country, religion, or culture”. Mythological stories have been an essential feature of literatures all over the world. India has a rich and long tradition of native oral and written literature which is full of myths that have been transferred from earlier generations through litterateurs. Mythology and religion go hand in hand as the religious beliefs and practices are based on the stories of the mythological heroes and events. The online Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries define “religion” as “the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader”. Every religion claims its own mythology although the origin of mythology can be traced before the conceptualisation of religion itself.

Premchand’s novel *Godaan* (1936) which is translated as *The Gift of a Cow* by Gordon C. Roadarmal in 1968 is full of Indian mythological and religious references. The novel is a representative story of a poor Indian peasant named, Hori who cultivates the field as a tenant of the landlord, Rai Sahib. Hori gets caught in the vicious circle of natural calamities, the landlords and the moneylenders. Due to the failing of the crops, he has no option than borrowing money from the local moneylenders for paying the rent, buying the bullocks and marrying his daughters. Like all other farmers of Belari, Hori becomes the victim of the exploitative and deceitful moneylenders. The village council too takes advantage of his naivety and penalizes him for accepting a chamar girl, Jhunia as his daughter-in-law. *Godaan* not only deals with the misery of the peasants and criticizes the evils of the native social system but also refers to the customs, beliefs and religious faiths of the people in pre-independence India.

Mythological Elements

Mythology is an essential feature of every society. It is an instrument that carries forward the beliefs, knowledge and history of the past generations to the next generations. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the heroic epics or scriptures of Hindu religion that consist of most of Hindu mythology have a significant impact on Indian psyche. Premchand devoted his complete life in writing about the commoners like farmers, workers, women and other destitute people of Indian society in his literary work. In *Godaan*, he very ingeniously captures the religious beliefs and practices of the native people. He depicts the role of the mythological heroes in the people’s life. The mythological heroes like Rama and Krishna who are considered as the seventh and eighth incarnations of Lord Vishnu respectively are major deities in

Hinduism. They are considered as ideal men to be followed by the Hindus and their stories are listened and recited with great reverence.

When Hori's wife, Dhaniya insists to complain the matter of poisoning of their cow by her brother-in-law, to the police, Hori beats and curses her. Dhaniya asks why the God who leaves Paradise and comes running to save Draupadi and even an elephant is not coming to help her then. Dhaniya refers to Lord Vishnu who comes in the form of Shri Krishna to help Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata* when she is being forcefully disrobed by the Kauravas (Williams 121). The elephant that Dhaniya refers is Gajendra, the King of elephants for whose help Lord Vishnu comes down from his abode. Gajendra was Indradhymna, a great king and a devotee of Lord Vishnu in his earlier life. He was cursed by sage Agastya and became an elephant. As an elephant when he is caught by a crocodile while drinking water from a lake, Lord Vishnu comes for his help and gives him salvation. George Williams writes, "Gajendra in great pain prayed to Vishnu, offering lotus flowers with his trunk ... Vishnu came and killed Huhu (the crocodile) and redeemed Indradhymna from the curse. Indradhymna immediately attained Vaikuntha, the abode of Vishnu" (158). Dhaniya asks why the God who comes to assist Draupadi and Gajendra does not help her to save from the torture of her husband. She says, "That God who had left Paradise and come running to save Draupadi and even an elephant-why was he lost in sleep now?" (Premchand 135).

When Jhuniya comes to Hori's house as his daughter-in-law, she is not accepted very happily by Hori and his wife. Gobar thinks if his parents lift a hand against Jhuniya and do not take her in the house there will be another *Mahabharata* war (Premchand 165). The war refers to the family feud between the Pandavas and the Kauravas resulting into a disastrous war that killed thousands of people. Traditionally, any serious quarrel in the family is labeled as *Mahabharata* war by the Indian people. The priest, Datadin gives references from the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, the Hindu scriptures that Brahmins had taken women of other castes, how their offspring had been considered Brahmins, and claims that the Brahmins of today are the offspring of their offspring. He tries to justify his son's relations with a *Chamar* girl (Premchand 302).

The Hindu mythological King Harishchandra too finds reference in the novel. When Pandit Onkarnath the editor of a newspaper threatens the Rai Sahib about publishing a letter about his extortion of levies and fines from the tenants, the Rai Sahib requests him not to play Harishchandra for the betterment of both of them (Premchand 215). The King Harishchandra of Ayodhya was well-known for his commitment to truth and for keeping his promises. He was so faithful to his promise that he lost his kingdom, his wife and his only son for the sake of

keeping his word. The Rai Sahib wants to bribe the editor and save himself from getting his image tarnished, so, asks Pandit Onkarnath not to be Harishchandra.

The mythological figures of the Hindu Goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati and Radha also find references in the novel. Pandit Onkarnath after getting drunk, expresses his liking for Malti, the physician, by saying that she is his Lakshmi, Saraswati and Radha. According to Hindu mythology Lakshmi is the wife of Lord Vishnu, Saraswati is the Goddess of learning, the arts, and scholarship and Radha is one of the favorite beloveds of Krishna. Jhuniya's father, Bhola while talking to Hori, says that when a good wife enters a home it's like the Goddess Lakshmi herself coming in. Datadin too, says to Hori not to raise his hand against the Lakshmi of his own home. He says, "What's all this, Hori?...Have you gone mad or something? Lifting your hand that against the Laxmi of your home?" (Premchand 134). The same woman if gets very angry is referred as Kali. Dhaniya is referred becoming as ferocious as Kali when the villagers decide to ban Hori's family from the public well as they have accepted Jhunia in their house (Premchand 153). Kali is a Goddess; the angry Uma or Parvati, Lord Siva's wife. She is the "hottest" of all the manifestations of Mahadevi who is the sum of all the other goddesses (Williams 173). The people of Belari also start thinking that Dhaniya is blessed by the Goddess Bhavani, another incarnation of Parvati who establishes justice by killing the demons (Premchand 144).

Goddess Parvati's husband Lord Shiva, the destroyer of the universe for the next creation is among the three most important gods in Hindu mythology. The other two are Lord Brahma, the creator and Lord Vishnu, the preserver. The wealthiest man called Mangaru in Hori's village is a devotee of Lord Shiva and spends most of his time in worship and meditation in a small temple that he has built (Premchand 330). Premchand has very skilfully woven the elements of Hindu mythology in the narrative of *Godaan*.

Religious Elements

The narrative is full of references of religious beliefs and practices too. Hori's family believes in God. When they are helpless in front of the circumstances, they believe that the God witnesses their hard work, honesty and innocence and he will do the justice. Dhaniya feels that it is God that has made the Rai Sahib scold on the members of the village council as they have extorted all the grains of her family as a fine (Premchand 219).

The landlord, Rai Sahib whose father was a devotee of Rama has a religious background. One of his uncles who has settled in Brindaban, a holy place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood, is a great devotee of Radha and he has written devotional poems. Another

uncle is a faithful disciple of Rama and he has been translating the *Ramayana* into Persian. The Rai Sahib celebrates at his place the *Dashahra* festival which signifies the victory of good over the evil by putting on the scenes from the *Ramayana* every year. For him the performance is a part of tradition and an occasion to invite his friends to drink and eat. However, for the servants and the soldiers and the tenants of the Rai Sahib the *Ramayana* show is more than just an entertainment. They consider it an auspicious work of God himself.

There is also the practice of recitations of the scriptures in Hinduism. The revenue clerk, Lala Pateshwari goes every full moon to hear the sacred recitation of the story of Lord Vishnu (Premchand 153). Thakur Dhyani Singh, the army person holds a ceremony of reading of the scripture at his place as he wants to make the Brahmins happy so that his marriage could be fixed soon. The common people like Hori attend such religious ceremony to seek blessings of God. The scripture of the *Ramayana* is looked at so reverently by the common people that a copy of the book wrapped in cloth is found in the houses of the people. Hori sees the book wrapped in Bhola's house. Rama who restores virtue and order in his kingdom, Ayodhya is looked as an ideal person to be followed by the Hindus. He is looked so reverently by the people in *Godaan* that they greet each other by saying 'Ram Ram.' Damri, the cane-weaver greets Hori by saying the same.

No Hindu religious performance is imagined without the Brahmin priests. Traditionally, the Brahmins have won great respect in people's mind in India. The people of Belari including the Rai Sahib and his agents bow down to Datadin when they meet him. Whenever Hori meets Datadin, he touches his feet and expresses his respect towards a Brahmin. Datadin is the priest of the village who is very adept in infusing fear in people's mind through religiosity. He says to the people that, if they displease or make the Brahmin angry, he will curse them and some disaster will follow in their life. Premchand exposes the crookedness of Datadin and his son, who give more importance to the outward rituals than their actual behavior. He ridicules their double-dealing and hypocrisy and brings out how they take advantage of common man's piety and helplessness in the name of religiosity.

The Indian people are so religious that they like to name their children after the names of their gods and goddesses. This is observed in the novel. In the narrative of *Godaan* there are characters like Hori Ram, Gauri Ram, Ramsevak whose names are associated with Lord Rama. The names like (Gobar)dhan and Govindi are connected with the name of Lord Krishna. Krishna takes the name Gobardhan due to his act of upholding the mountain with his left hand and for saving the people of Vrindavan from a terrible flood caused by Indra, the King of the gods and the deity of thunder and rain (Williams 187). Govinda is Krishna's another name and Mr. Khanna's wife's name, Govindi originates from it. Govindi means a devotee of Krishna.

Mathura, Hori's son-in-law's name is taken from Krishna's birthplace. The children are named after the epic characters as people wish that their children should acquire the qualities of the heroes. The tradition of naming the children indicates the influence of the Hindu scriptures on the minds of the people and their belief system.

The people of Hindu and Islam are found living cordially with each other in Lucknow in the novel. The Muslims are mentioned fasting during the month of Ramzan when they eat nothing, drink nothing and smoke nothing between the dawn and sunset. The Hindus fast on the eleventh day of the moon which is dedicated to Lord Vishnu (Premchand 249). They follow their own religious faiths peacefully without any communal disharmony. There is a reference in the narrative of the *Koran*, the holy book of Islam. Mirza Khurshed, the Muslim businessman quotes from the *Koran* to show what high ideals the emperors held in ancient times. While criticizing the contemporary political system, he says that the emperors weren't allowed to spend even a cowrie from the treasury for their personal use. The pilgrimages of the Muslim and Hindu people are also mentioned in the novel. Mirza Khurshed has already made two pilgrimages to Mecca. The Muslims believe that Mecca is a holy place to which every Muslim who has health and sufficient means should perform a *Hajj* i.e., the pilgrimage. After getting settled in Lucknow, Gobar thinks that if he sends some money home, his father will be anxious to make a pilgrimage to Gaya (Premchand 247). In Hinduism going on a pilgrimage is considered as the high point of religious life of a Hindu. People believe that the act of pilgrimage washes away moral impurity i.e., *papa* and grant religious merit i.e., *punya*. The pilgrimage sites are associated with the mythological narratives of the gods and goddesses. Therefore, they are believed to have the power of salvation and the performer of the pilgrimage is ensured salvation after his death, or a rebirth in heaven.

The traditional Hindu idea of birth and rebirth finds expression in the novel. Hori believes in the idea of rebirth and the continuity of soul after a person's death. When Gobar argues that God creates all people equal but the powerful beats down the poor and becomes rich, Hori says that it is not the case. According to him, the rich people are enjoying happiness because they have done good works in last life and the poor like he and his family have not done anything good so there is no pleasure in their life. Mr. Khanna's wife Govindi too thinks that her misery in this life is because of her deeds in the past lives. Hori's daughter-in-law, Jhuniya is grateful to her mother-in-law, Dhaniya for giving her shelter in her house and she wishes that in the next birth Dhaniya be her mother. She says, "All I pray is that you be my mother if God grants me another birth" (Premchand 192). On the contrary, while going to

Lucknow Gobar hears Kodai's wife saying to him that she will not go to his house even in her next seven rebirths as she is tortured by her mother-in-law. According to Hindu mythology marriage is a relationship that lasts for seven lives.

The Hindus consider a cow as a sacred animal so, cow slaughter is a sin in Hinduism. When Hori's brother, Hira poisons the cow, Dhaniya says that after coming out from the jail, he has to go on a pilgrimage and has to give a feast for the murder of the cow as a penance for his sin. The title of the novel 'Godaan' itself refers to one of the very important rituals of Hindu religion with which the novel ends. When a person dies, the Brahman priest is offered with a cow or some other gifts by the family so that the dead person attains heaven. When Hori is on the deathbed after he gets struck by a heat-wave, Hira and other people asks Dhaniya to make a *godaan*. Heera says, "Make your heart strong bhaabhi,...Make the gift of the cow. Dada is leaving us now" (Premchand 436). Unable to offer a cow to the Brahmin, Dhaniya gives few coins to Datadin and wishes that her husband should get salvation. Premchand discloses the paradoxical situation in the narrative. A person's family which has no food at home to eat is expected to offer a cow to the priest at the time of his death.

Conclusions

Thus, it is observed that Premchand has woven various mythological and religious elements through *Godaan* to draw the realistic picture of the Indian society. The characters of the novel are found being under a deep-rooted impact of the mythological stories and the heroes from the epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Although the characters in the novel claim to be religious and faithful to the gods they worship, their offerings are only formalities. They never budge from doing wrong things. As soon as they come out of their houses they change into devils. The Brahmin priest like Datadin and Matadin who claim that they follow all the sacred rules of a true Brahmin, in reality are hypocrites and exploit the poor, faithful villagers in the name of religion. The Rai Sahib spends hours in worshipping the gods and offers charity but behaves very cruelly and inhumanly with his tenants. Lala Pateshwari too shows to be very religious but exploits the poor peasants by conspiring with the government officers. Dhyan Singh arranges the recitation of the scripture but only for his material gain. Premchand criticises the conservative Hindu social system that gives importance to traditionalism and assumes the superiority of the priest class who have been exploiting the faiths of the common people for ages. He severely attacks on the ritual formalities and the outward religious show off in Hinduism.

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