

A Farmer turned bonded labour in Premchand's A Quarter and One ser of Wheat

"To make Agriculture Sustainable,
The Grower has got to be able to make a profit".

-Sam Farr

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Abstract: Premchand (1880-1936) the greatest writer of all time has written so much prior of his time. He has penned fourteen novels, two plays and more than three hundred short stories. He has the credit of setting up his own printing press. He had tried even in writing articles, reviews and editorials. His well-known works in Hindi are Sevasadan (1919; The Abode of Service), Rangbhumi (1925; tr. as The Playground), Karmabhumi (1932; Field of Action), and Godan (1936; tr. as The Gift of a Cow). Harish Trivedi in his foreword to the complete short stories of Premchand opines "Premchand seemed to have been a firm believer in what the English poet John Keats, in a memorable phrase, called "the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination." (xviii)

Keywords: Farmer, agriculture, bonded labour.

Agriculture is a crucial source of income for a farmer and rural India. Bonded labour was a stigma on Indian society where poverty and land lessness was misused by the rich people. It was the time where humans were treated inhumanly and their piece of the land being snatched. In some cases without a piece of land was compelled to the slavery. As Bandyopadhyaya opines "A land less person is a non-person. He is a faceless biped animal having no social significance".⁽³⁰⁾ Earlier farmer was landless and indebt but now he is having land and is in debt. The present paper aims to study about the plights of farmers who were enforced to bonded labour. *A Quarter and One Ser of Wheat* is not a fictional story sketched by the greatest story writer Premchand but it is based on a real story incident. It is dedicated to all farmers who suffered for many years till the abolition of the bonded labour act in 1976. The weaker section of the people was exploited by the rich by snatching their piece of land. Thus transforming the farmers into labourers and then to a bonded labour. Premchand through the story of Shankar is voicing against the unfair treatment of farmers in our society. Years have rolled on but the farmer is still not in a better position and is a victim of modernization.

The poor farmer Shankar led a simple life and never indulged in any tricky life. He was a pious man who thanked God even if his tummy was not filled. When a holymen turned to his home he would take the responsibility of his with the high respect. “He could go to sleep hungry himself, but how could he make a sadhu sleep on an empty stomach, for a sadhu was a true follower of god!. (56) One fateful evening a sadhu arrived at Shankar’s home. He had full faith in religion but the appearance of the sadhu revealed his true nature. Sadhu was not the one who spent his time in saying prayers but of a one who enjoyed eating and roaming pilgrim spots. Shankar failed to recognize the cunning sadhu but was in a fix to provide him with good food. What he had at home was just barley so he made up his mind to borrow some wheat flour. Premchand is here mocking the religious men. One religious man begs and eats from poor man and the poor man borros from another religious man to fill the other. The village priest had some wheat so borrowed a quarter and one ser, a bare kilo of wheat from him. “His wife had grinded it into flour and sadhu mahatma ate well, slept well, gave his blessings and left early next morning.” (57)

Twice a year the priest took a share of harvest from Shankar’s field. Shankar had given little extra with the usual five ser to settle the account but the priest turned up again. This time Shankar gave him double of the usual amount to get freed from the debt. But Shankar never dared to open his mouth regarding the settlement of it. After seven years the priest turned to a money lender and farmer Shankar became a labourer. Shankar’s brother Mangal had forced him to devide the land to take his share. As a result there was less to cultivate and both turned to labour work. “Things became so bad that he was reduced to a being a farmer in name only.” (58) He was not able to farm in his little piece of land so he did all sorts of work for his livelihood. In his difficult times the priest appeared and asked him to pay his debt which had become five and a half mann of wheat. Shankar was shocked to hear that. He had already given so much more to that priest and now after seven years he was mentioning it. Now Shanakr feels “I would have measured exactly one and quarter ser of wheat and given it to him. Was it for this day that he kept silent for all these years?” (59) The priest had taken extra wheat long back from Shankar but he had not mentioned that in his account book and now he was torturing the poorest Shankar. “I will cross your name the day you settle your account; or else the amount will keep increasing.” (60) The priest even scared Shankar by telling if not in this world he would take it from him in the other world. Innocent Shankar feared of a Brahmin thought he would go to hell if he hurted a Brahmin. But the priest had made a mountain out of a seed of rye. When Shankar says he would give whatever he wants but he would have to answer for it before god then the priest says “Hermits, ascetics, gods – they are all

Brahmins”.⁽⁶¹⁾ and he was damn sure he would be saved by them. The amount of wheat was calculated and it came out to sixty rupees if Shankar failed to pay it within a year then the interest amount would increase by two and a half rupees. A document was prepared for sixty rupees and Shankar had to pay extra for the stamp and drafting cost of the document. “The entire village criticized the priest, but no one could say it to his face. Everyone needed something from a moneylender. No one wanted to get into any trouble with him.”⁽⁶²⁾ In our society power and caste rules the poor and lower caste people. Ignorant and good men like Shankar would suffer for their no fault.

Shankar worked hard for the whole year with self control and empty stomach. He had collected sixty rupees from his sweat and went to the priest happily for the settlement. But the priest wanted the fifteen rupees also which he still owes him. The priest was stubborn to have the money and Shankar was not set free from the debt for just fifteen rupees more. Shankar was not helped by the villagers as they were afraid of the priest. Newton’s theory of law of motion: “for every action in nature there is equal and opposite reaction” holds good in Shankar’s case who had worked hard for a year and failed to free himself becomes hopeless for the next year. He becomes careless about his debt and the priest did not ask him for the following three years. “Like a clever hunter he waited for the right occasion to take aim.”⁽⁶⁴⁾ After deducting sixty rupees after three years it had become 120 rupees. Shankar was not bothered to pay him but now the money lender wanted it back in his own way. Shankar did not have any property to pledge so he was asked to become a bonded labour and even his wife and son were part of it. All would work at his place and get half a ler of barley every day to eat, blanket once a year. The money lender is so ruthless that he says “I am employing you only to help you repay your doan”.⁽⁶⁵⁾ For the sake of a quarter and one ser of wheat Shankar was pushed to life time slavery along with his family. From the very next itself all worked at the money lender. It was heartbreaking scene for Shankar to witness his wife do all chores which she had not done earlier and his children suffering in hunger. He remained a mute spectator with a religious thought to console himself that he was punished for his previous birth. Shankar worked for the priest for twenty years and died still 120 rupees, written against his name in the register. After Shanakr’s death the priest prisoned his son for the debt. The never ending debt and never ending sufferings for the poor farmers, earlier it was a bonded labour system for the farmers and now in the present time they have chosen the way of suicide to clear the debt. The ways of the farmer’s suffering may be different from year after year but it is so pathetic that the debt remains.

Premchand's stories mirrors the society as it is, with the wide spectrum of critical analysis of the human nature. Premchand says, "My stories are usually based on some observations and personal experience. I try to introduce some dramatic elements in them. I do not write stories merely to describe an event. I try to express some philosophical/emotional reality through them." (xxvi) Agriculture plays a vital role in Indian society. There has been a revolutionary change in the scheme of an ancient agriculture but not much change in the fate of farmers. Our government has taken initiation towards the welfare of the farmers like Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana in 2016. The scheme aims to provide insurance coverage to farmers for crop failure. As per the Financial Express (dated 8th Jan 2019) agriculture employed 50% of the Indian work force and contributed 17-18% to country's GDP. Due to the climatic changes and lack of rainfall has increased the woes of the farmers. According to Will Rodgers "The Farmer has to be an Optimist or he wouldn't still be a farmer".

References:

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