



Soordas as an Epitome of Gandhi

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“He wanted to decide whether he was a God or a human being”

-*Rangbhumi* (427)

Premchand's, *Rangbhumi* (1925) is a critique of the semi feudal and the colonial rule. It is an inspiring account of freedom struggle. Writing for Premchand was a mission and novel writing developed as an art form under him. *Rangbhumi* is considered as a Gandhian novel, even though Gandhi never appears himself in the text.

Rangbhumi; Playground/Theatre/stage is a battlefield of conflicting perspectives and positions. My aim is to show that there is a constant tussle between Allegory and Realism and between Sainthood and Humanity. The Gandhian influence on Soordas is nothing but an exaggeration.

Nationalism is an amalgamation of interests and sentiments and Mahatma and Saints care for their name and reputation.

Premchand was influenced by Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and Tolstoy's ideas of spirituality. He first met Gandhi in Gorakhpur, in 1916 but later became dejected as Gandhi called off the Non-cooperation movement after the Chauri Chaura incident.

The novel centres around John Sevak, an industrialist and his project to build a tobacco factory on the land of a blind beggar Soordas. Soordas resisted John's attempts to buy his land. John Sevak was supported by many local princes and civil servants but Soordas resisted to sell away his ancestral property as the neighbours graze their cattle there. While Sophia and Vinay join the anti-colonial movement.

Sacrificing themselves Soordas, Vinay and Sophia were unable to completely change the world. Several characters change their self-serving ways due to the influence of the saintly characters but they cannot transform

everyone. In authors note, Premchand links Gandhi and Soordas, “Rangbhomi’s hero Soordas is a remarkable character in the history of the Indian novel.... He is an ideal Gandhian character”(Premchand 14).

The link between Soordas and Gandhi stands for the larger discourse of nationalism and shows the allegorical significance of the novel. The novel can be read as a “Metatheoretical engagement” (Anjaria 79). It presents sainthood as an object of desire for Soordas, the Gandhian character. Hence the authors note shows the problematic interpretation of the text and allegory becomes an operative mode. It brings together urban and rural by indulging in the dialectic between allegorical symbol and realist character. The text shows the problems of acting according to one’s wishes and problem of saintliness.

The novel can be read as an extended critique on super humanness and how it functions as a desire in the nationalist period. How humans struggle between their desires and the limitations of humanness i.e. realist landscap .

Premchand wrote in his essay, “A faultless character will just become a god and we won’t be able to understand him. Such a character will have no influence over us” (Anjaria 79).

The desire to be raised like God becomes the central problem of Soordas . Soordas along with Vinay and Sophia look saintly and truthful but have their own hunger and needs.

The virtuous, Brahmachari, Satyagrahi, poor, elite and subaltern, all are united under the umbrella of the incurable reality of humanity and saintly aspirations. On one hand Soordas acts like a saint with Gandhian values, beyond personal greed, sensuality and believing in karma. His unwillingness to give up his land is an act of sacrifice. He privileges the benefit of society over his personal financial gain. He is pictured as an Organic Gandhian and Raja sahib called him “Mahatma”.

“a true benefactor doesn’t desire fame, Soordas wasn’t even aware of the importance of his sacrifice and charity” (Premchand 89).He manages to transform even Bhairo ,his enemy with his inner purity and refuse to leave his house under threat .But Soordas finds it difficult to value saintly ideas over personal ideas and often laments over his decisions .He feels frustrated and considers to give away his land. He fantasies siting home and playing flute. All this exposes the human side of the saint.

Gandhian philosophy is under critical scrutiny and Soordas doesn’t idolize Gandhian figure. The metaphor of “blindness” suggests the spiritual dimension but Premchand does not allow this idealization to remain. Around the deathbed he projects ambivalence of sainthood. He refuses to take chloroform and talks spiritually. The doctor interprets Soordas’s saintly behaviour not as an evidence of this saintliness but sign of

his mortality. Sainthood is not a real state but a state of illness. Narrator tells us “he was neither a sadhu, nor a Mahatma, nor a devata, nor an angel. He was a small, feeble creature.... The virtues were few and the defects many” (Premchand 604).

The text resounds a proclamation that after the death of Soordas the battle of death will continue. He has lost, but the game is not yet finish. The two would come together and meet again and yet again ,till the evil has not lost .His soliloquy shows they will continue to fight .The title of the novel becomes a metaphor taken from a song that he sings in chapter 18. “bhai, why do you turn your face away from battle? /you have come to the rangbhumi to show your glory” (234-5).

Soordas is flawed as a human being. After his death a statue is erected as posthumous honour but is knocked down by Mahendra Singh. The rebuilt statue retains the blemishes till the end .It suggest perhaps the distortions in Soordas ,in Gandhi and in all humans .Soordas’s prophecy on his death shows that ‘a Mahatma will soon be born in this country” (Premchand 586).A saviour will be born other than Gandhi who will take the country forward.

Gandhi though not mentioned in the text threatens the narrative and show realism at its conflict.



WORK CITED

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