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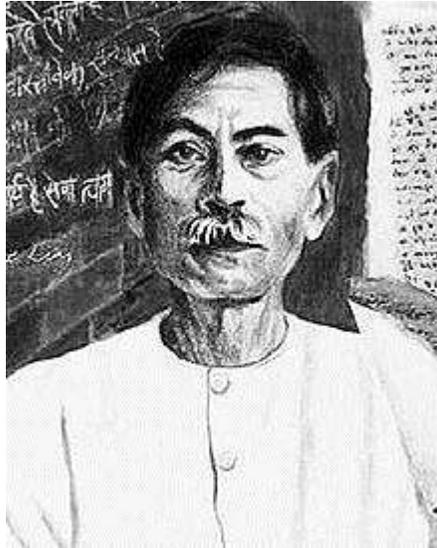
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A Critical Note on a Short Story of Premchand *The Holy Panchayat*

R. Mahendran, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Premchand

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premchand>

Abstract

Munshi Premchand is a renowned writer of modern Indian literature. Most of his works reveal the life of villagers and their society. The story 'The Holy Panchayat' discusses the

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practice of the village court and its judgment. The verdict given by the village court divided the friends as well as reunited them. The author makes them realize that the truth is a triumph.

Introduction

Before the contemporary courts like Munsif, District, High and Supreme courts in India, the village courts served the nation delivering justice. India is known for its great culture and unique heritage in the world. Mahatma Gandhi once said that villages were the back-bone of India. They followed the practice of village courts for deciding cases. Whenever a dispute arose between the villagers or neighbouring villages or family feuds the village Panchayat would easily solve the problems at free of cost. All of them obeyed the verdict of the Panchayat.

Munshi Premchand

Munshi Premchand, a veteran writer of the twentieth century, both in Urdu and Hindi, was born in Lamahi, a tiny village near Banaras in eastern Uttar Pradesh. He is comparable to any great short story writer in the world. He is a multifaceted person - writer, novelist, editor, journalist, biographer, translator besides being a publisher. His real name was Dhanpat Rai but he always used his pseudo names, Nawab Rai in Urdu and Premchand in Hindi. This prolific writer has penned more than three hundred short stories and a dozen novels along with some biographies and journals. His first collection of short stories in Urdu, *Soze Waten* was published in 1917. His first short story is *Duniya Ka Sabse Anmol Ratan* (The Most Precious Jewel in the World). He started writing the story *Barhe Ghar Ki Beti* with the pseudonym of Premchand .

The Hindi story *Panch Parmeshwar* (The Holy Panchayat) was included in the collection *Prem Purnima* which was published in 1916. The English translated version of the story has been utilized to write this essay.

The Holy Panchayat - A Critique

The focal theme of the story is ‘upholding justice’. The entire story shows the life of folks, their sufferings, their disputes, their faith in God, and their loyalty and justice.

Jumman Sheik and Algu Chowdhari are childhood friends. Even though they are not close relatives, or belong to the same religion they are inseparable friends. It is evident that relatives are our destiny, but friends are our choice. Algu is an obedient student of the teacher who is Jumman’s father. Algu is softer than Jumman. He is very calm. That is why he is highly respected among the folks.

Jumman is greedy. He has a destitute aunt. She owns some land which is to be transferred to her nephew on signing an agreement. The main resolution of the agreement is that he has to look after her by providing food and clothes. The old lady was looked after carefully until the registration of the land was over. As a robber who is waiting for acquiring somebody’s property

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unlawfully, he grabbed her land. The helpless widow was not given proper food and clothes as per the agreement. Moreover she was scolded by the heartless husband and wife. In our country the old age homes are functioning enormously because of the ill treatment of sons, daughters and other family members. It is a pitiable condition in our nation not only in the period of Premchand but even today. The old lady thinks that the Panchayat may settle her problem. So she approaches everyone in the village to call for the Panchayat. She receives only advice from them but no one comes forward to help her. With the continuous pressure from the lady they agree to proceed with the case.

Jumman has a plan to betray his aunty from day one after the agreement was signed. He believes that his influence among villagers can save him from punishment. Algu, the dearest friend of Jumman, was nominated as Chief of the session. The village court has a good system for selecting the Chief. The nominated Chief has to be accepted by both the parties. Premchand might have thought that a permanent judge could indulge in corruption to kill the truth. ‘The truth is a triumph’ is being practiced by them effectively. These judges have no friends and enemies, poor and rich, literate and illiterate, human being and non-human being but it is their main duty to protect the justice.

Some Episodes of Instant Justice

A Chola king of Tamilnadu, Manuneethi Cholan sacrificed his only beloved son Veetivitanakan to preserve justice. The king was believed to have killed his own son to provide justice to a Cow, following Manu's law. Legend has it that the king hung a giant bell in front of his courtroom for anyone needing justice to come and ring the bell. One day, he came out on hearing the ringing of the bell by a Cow. On enquiry he found that the Calf of that Cow was killed under the wheels of his son's chariot. In order to provide justice to the cow, he killed his own son under the chariot as punishment, in order to make himself suffer as much as the cow. His name has since then been used as a metaphor for fairness and justice in Tamil literature.

The king of the Pandiya Kingdom, Nedunchezian committed suicide for giving wrong judgment to Kovalan, the husband of Kannaki in a Tamil epic *Silapathikaram*. Kovalan goes with an ornament an anklet (called “silambu”, a golden anklet with a tube that contained rubies inside to make musical sound while walking) to sell it for money to live. A greedy goldsmith sees the silambu and informs the King that he has got the thief, who stole the silambu of the Queen. Nedunchezian, in a hurry to go to the Queen's palace and appease her, orders the death of Kovalan and to bring back the ornament. Kannaki becomes furious on hearing the news and rushes to the Royal Court of the King. She proves that Kovalan was innocent by breaking her remaining silambu to show that it contained rubies and not pearls, as in the Queen's silambu. Pandiyar Nedunchezian regrets his unjust act, and dies on the throne, followed by the Queen. The great epic writer Ilango says, “Righteousness will penalize the ruler” (*arasiyal pilaitthorukku arang kootravathum*).

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Algu's Special Situation

Algu is in a difficult situation now whether he will save his friend or keep justice. After hearing the grievances of both the parties, he uttered the verdict, "Jumman sheik! The panches have considered the matter. It seems to them that your aunt should be paid a monthly allowance. It is our opinion that there is enough income from her property to pay her such an allowance. This is our decision. If Jumman is unwilling to pay her the allowance, the agreement should be cancelled".

Man's primary duty is to be just and true. It is righteous people who support the world. According to the Bible, obedience to the law or uprightness of the spirit was rewarded with joy such as abundant harvest, deliverance from misfortune and conquest of enemies.

Seeking Revenge

The judgment delivered in the *panchayat* divided the friends. Instead of honouring the judgment, Jumman wants to take revenge on Algu.

Life is a mixture of evil and good, ups and downs, merits and demerits. The serpent enters into Algu's life in different forms. Sometimes the righteous will have to face problems. Unfortunately this has happened in Algu's life through a trader. A sale deed brings Algu to the panchayat. When a charge is framed on anybody it is to be proved by him only in the court. The trader, Samju Sahu, purchased an ox from Algu on credit. The trader thinks that the ox will pull his cart and make him affluent. Unusually he used the ox for more than four trips from the village to the market every day. This greedy trader didn't feed the ox properly. The food is the only energy for cattle which is working hard to improve the man's business. One day, the ox was not able to pull the cart because of lack of strength. It had become like a skeleton and it died on the way.

Natural Justice Meeting Out Punishment

Premchand here has planned a good punishment to the trader. He kept the money and tins of ghee in the cart and started sleeping. When he woke up he found that he had lost his belongings. Instead of realizing his mistake, he blamed the ox and Algu. Samjhu charged Algu as having sold him the sick ox. He and his wife denied giving back the credit. The argument between them made the villagers suggest a meeting of the panchayat.

Jumman, who was waiting for a chance to take revenge on Algu, has been nominated as Chief of the panchayat. Whether the judge is a friend or a foe, he has to uphold justice. The knowledge of one's responsibility helps to improve one's relationship with others. Whenever we behave badly this inner realization helps bring us back to the right path.

Change of Views Brought in by Changed Status

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Cloistered in his comfortable cabin the newspaper editor will make scathing attacks on politics and ministers. But if by chance he were to enter politics, his style of writing would change and he would even become impartial, apply discrimination and hold very objective views. This change comes about from the realization of his responsibility. In the same way, young people can be high strung, thoughtless, and temperamental. Their parents are afraid that they might end up giving a bad reputation to the family. But when a young man has to shoulder the responsibility of his own family, he learns to be patient. This change comes about because of his inner realization.

As soon as Jumman Sheik was appointed sarpanch, he felt a similar sense of responsibility for his high position. He thought, "I am sitting on the highest throne of justice and *dharma*. Whatever comes from my lips will be treated with the same respect as if they were the words of God. I must not stray even an inch from the truth". His speech proved that whoever the judge may be the truth will always win at the end.

After hearing the petitioners' points, Jumman pronounced the verdict, "Algu Chowdhari and Samjhu Sahu, the members have considered your case very thoroughly. It is only proper that Samjhu should pay the full amount for the ox. When he bought the ox, it was in good health. If he had paid cash down at the time, the present situation would not have arisen. The ox died because it was made to work very hard, and it was not fed or looked after carefully"

The entire crowd joined in 'God bless the sarpanch'. Everyone praised the decision. This is not the work of man; God lives in the heart of a panch. This was His blessing. Before the panch, falsehood was swept away. Algu and Jumman earlier forgot their friendship, and now they forgot their enmity; but, they kept the morality of their lives.

Jumman embraced Algu and said, "My brother! Ever since you became sarpanch and decided the case against me, I have been your deadly enemy. But today I learnt as a panch that I am neither anybody's friend, nor enebody's foe. A panch cannot see anything except justice. Today I am convinced that God speaks through a panch's lips".

Innate Idealism of Premchand

Premchand exalts his readers by his innate idealism and goodness. His works are a force for good in society. He favoured right and justice, and decried wrong and injustice. His descriptions of life are realistic, but he saw the conflict between the forces of good and evil. He had faith that ultimately the truth would triumph over wrong.

Conclusion

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This is a characteristic story in Premchand's repertoire. Man is a mixture of good and evil. He falls, but ultimately recovers. This is almost a Rousseauque faith in the innate nobility of man – a faith undermined in many cases by the sophistications of civilization.

Premchand believes that the village justice is impelled by the compulsion of spirit to do justice, forgetting evil qualities like rancor and grievances. Such justice is rare even in village society, driven numerous ways by differences, prejudices, caste-groupings, superstitions and dogmas.

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