

Premchand's "The Holy Panchayat": The Text Resisting the Tale

- Anand Prakash -

Premchand's "The Holy Panchayat": The Text Resisting the Tale

By Anand Prakash

"The Holy Panchayat" is a tale told by the author-narrator who himself plays a significant, indeed a decisive role in it. Even as the two main characters Algu Choudhary and Jumman Sheikh undergo an unsettling experience and come out entirely transformed at the end, what centrally catches our attention is the 'moral' of the story, the educative principle that governs it: "A panch cannot see anything except justice." Do we thus not see a tension between the living vibrant characters and an idea that the author-narrator wishes to put across? In answer we could say unequivocally that the said tension is the soul of this story – it is this that lends appeal and power to "The Holy Panchayat."

Apparently, there is nothing extraordinary about the story. It is a simple sequence of events in the **folk tale** mode that lets the readers know about two friends who fell out for some reason and were later united. This plot **structure is firm**; never does the author allow any deviation from its logic and discipline. Still, the space within this structure is fully exploited to present **a complex village situation** difficult to comprehend vis-a-vis the antagonisms that attend it. A brief view of these antagonisms to enter subtle authorial intention embodying the story may be useful.

First consider a few pot shots the narrator is taking at the social landscape in India around the time the story was written, in **1916** to be precise. The year is significant as being a colony India had then become an **indirect participant in** the First World War. The author-narrator's mood is clearly defiant in the context. Early in life, Algu, for instance, did not take much interest in studies: "He never allowed his teacher's hukka to get cold even for a minute, because

each time he escaped to fill the chillum, he could avoid his books for half an hour.” As Algu avoids books, his father provides the rationale for the act: the father “would say that education is not derived only from reading books, but one learns more from the teacher’s blessings. One only needed his teacher’s benevolence.” Following the view of his father, Algu “would console himself with the thought that although he had worked hard (filling the chillums assiduously?) for his education, if knowledge was not in his kismet what could he do?” **The second critical act** relates to the two shopkeepers in the story: ‘Samjhu’ and ‘Jhagru.’ The former is the villain in “The Holy Panchayat.” What does his **name, for instance**, signify? The word has associations with cleverness, shrewd understanding and compromise. Stretched a bit further, it may suggest double-dealing and trickery. This is precisely what Samjhu does in his role as a counter-weight to Algu. The other shopkeeper ‘Jhagru’ is the cruder version of the same: a quarrelsome, trouble-making person. In the village the duo would be quite a nasty combination as buyers, sellers and moneylenders. And of course, the story is about “justice” that is supposed to come from the panch.

These we come across early on. Later, towards the end of the story, we mark an extremely sharp and all-embracing comment by the author-narrator in which he compares the two assemblies (panchayats): the human one and that of birds. As humans are disturbed by the noise of birds, the birds are amused at the way men and women of the village are busy ‘managing’ their affairs. This makes the scene move from the **unreal to the surreal**. By the side of the panchayat, says the author, “In the field some crows were having their own panchayat. Their topic of discussion was whether they had any right over the peas growing in the fields. And until the matter was resolved, they felt they had every right to

disapprove the chowkidar's loud yells as he went about guarding the fields. A group of parrots sitting on the branches of some trees had raised the question of how men could call them dishonest when they themselves did not hesitate to deceive their friends." In a lighter vein (or is that really so?) the author makes the point pertaining to the role of the state (chowkidar) vis-a-vis the basic right to food and the broader principle of fellow-feeling (deceiving friends). There are many more instances of this kind but these would suffice to give us a perspective on the story.

We see women on the margins of life in the village. Their number in the story is four – the old aunt, Jumman's wife Kariman (she is given a name unlike others who have none), Samjhu's wife and Algu's wife. Apart from the old aunt, all these women support the cause of their husbands appearing to be their appendages merely. That this is not accidental becomes clear when we read the reference to wife-beating to be their appendages merely. That this is not accidental becomes clear when we read the reference to wife-beating ("Algu quietened his wife by using a stick"), something that Premchand disapproved of and, in fact, hated. The most marginalized of these all is the old aunt. What is her role and place in the story? A close consideration of this question would afford an altogether different interpretation of the story and free the account from the fold tale mode. **The tale says one thing and the text another.** The former asserts the relevance of wisdom, human values, justice and a kind of godliness under which "God lives in the heart of a panch" is a truth we have to believe in. The tale **thus has** a happy ending. "Algu began to cry. His tears washed away the misunderstandings that had accumulated in their hearts." **The tale has termed the issue "misunderstandings."** **The text, however, reworks the**

tale in a different direction, putting to naught the projected ideal of reconcilability of the opposites.

Of the many antagonisms in the story (education and illiteracy, inherent faith-based distance between one community and another, conduct of merchants and peasants, men's attitude towards women, etc.) the one picked up by the author as the most crucial is the **ownership of property**: this is the bone of contention between the old aunt and her nephew Jumman.

The old aunt's career graph indeed constitutes the story's plot that begins with her transferring the little property to Jumman, in return for which he would give her shelter, food and clothing. Realizing that after the "papers were registered in the court", the aunt is entirely at his mercy, Jumman with wife in tow becomes indifferent towards her and flouts and tenets of the deal. This leaves the old aunt with no option but to approach the village panchayat. However, exercise of the option involves running around to mobilize support for her cause. Can she do this? As per the narrator, "In the days to follow, the old aunt, a stick in hand, went around from village to village. Her back was bent like a bow. Every step she took was painful. But a problem had come up; it was necessary to solve it." The said "problem" in this case is linked with the very existence and the aunt takes its resolution as a necessity and challenge. The narrator's articulation of the task being that "it was necessary to solve it" sets the tone of things to follow, much beyond the scope of the tale since the job in hand of mobilizing support would require discussion and persuasive talk at the broader community level. Not bothering that Algu is Jumman's friend, she approaches him for support and is told, "I'll come along, but I won't open my mouth during the panchayat."

One can't miss the intellectual passion in her response to this, as she says:

“ ‘But why?’ she asked.

‘What answer can I give to this? It’s my wish. Jumman is an old friend of mine and I can’t afford to spoil my relationship with him.’

‘Will you turn your back to justice for fear of ruining your friendship?’”

Mark that the debate here is about higher matters – friendship, justice and moral fear, also, the character pursuing the issue is an illiterate old widow whom none in the village takes seriously. Has this character been consciously chosen by the author, and if so, with what specific purpose? We are left to wonder.

In the text stage, the old woman is raised to the level of a leader meant to exhort a whole gathering to come out in the open against the wrong and immoral ?? in village life. Mark the way the case is argued and words used **with loaded message** in the long speech the old woman delivers:

“Members of the panchayat! Three years ago I transferred all my property to the name of my nephew. All of you know this. In return for this, Jumman had agreed to feed and clothe me. Somehow, for a year, I managed to suffer through, but now I cannot bear their ill-treatment. I neither got enough food nor adequate clothes. I am a poor helpless widow, unable to fight in a court or durbar. Except for you all, who else will listen to my grief? I am willing to accept whatever you decide. If you think I am at fault, you can punish me. If you find Jumman guilty, explain matters to him. Why does he want to suffer a helpless widow’s curse? I will be happy to abide by your decision.”

The moral anger as well a sense of deep resistance at the back of this speech is unmistakable. We have to consider whether at this moment the author-narrator and the old woman have merged into a unified voice that represents the view of justice.

Interestingly, the old aunt disappears at this point in the story and there is no direct mention of her hereafter. However, the story is far from over and the dynamic that she brought in continues. Thus, there is a virtual extension of her presence in the form of Algu bearing the brunt of Jumman's anger assisted by Samjhu's introduction in the story. This takes us towards the regulating idea of coincidence (the next one in the dock being Algu) that may seem to act as the hand of fate, not allowing human intervention beyond a point. In consequence, "The Holy Panchayat" re-enters the mode of the folk tale which in the context is significant.

A form that defines parameters of possibility in given situations, the folk tale as a form used by the narrator to educate and entertain a gathering reminds the audience that faith in human goodness is essential, in spite of the many obstacles that occur in common life. In the present case of the "The Holy Panchayat", the larger goal of achieving harmony and working out resolutions in specific cases is reached when gods and humans combine to resist evil. In India, the twentieth century being witness to a long and sustained fight with British imperialism, the folk tale would change its nature, as it has, and offer the hope through a vision where humans would become gods – the latter would not intervene now through miracles but speak "through a panch's lips." Does the folk tale convince us about possibilities of such a combination of gods and humans every time specific individuals in the community faced difficulties?

The answer to this question could well be: yes and no. Yes, because the vision of the good succeeding finally would inspire the aggrieved party to struggle, in whichever way, to set the anomaly right; no, because collective might of the evil ones would devise new methods to further their “unjust ways.” The faith, then, would have to decisively shift from the godly will to the social act of the good ones getting united through discussion and campaign. Let us not overlook the presence of the weak and the destitute in the village at the end of the story: they have achieved a minor, though significant goal, but issues of hunger, deprivation and cruelty to the weak remain as before. Thus, the folk tale hero in “The Holy Panchayat” is Algu whereas the hero of the text of the story is the old aunt – she like many others is yet to acquire a name but has shown the grit to confront evil. Mark that in the story this is not an idea, characteristic of a tale, but an indication of things to emerge sooner or later through awakening and spread of awareness. This links well with Premchand’s literary mission of contributing to India’s secular-nationalist identity at a time when the commoners were exhorted to come together on principles of persuasion and debate by the political figure called Gandhi.