

# THE GIFT OF COW

Premchand

*Godan* (The Gift of a Cow, 1936)

## Story

*Godan*, Premchand's last novel and his masterpiece, tells the story of all India through a close focus on a family in a village and a miscellany of characters in the town. The family is headed by Hori, a poor but not destitute man, who wants to own a cow to fulfil a Hindu obligation to offer the animal as a gift to a Brahmin when one dies. Fortunately, Hori is able to purchase a cow from a local man, Bhola, but this leads to the disastrous love affair between Hori's son, Gobar, and Bhola's widowed daughter, Jhuniya. When Jhuniya gets pregnant, Gobar simply dumps her with his parents and leaves to settle in a nearby town, which introduces a host of other characters: a doctor, a landowner, a lawyer and a businessman. While the worlds of the village and the town appear separate, we observe the personal, financial and religious bonds that draw them into a single society. Back in the village, Hori's act of kindness in accepting the pregnant and unmarried girl is seen as improper and enrages the villagers. He is fined by the village council for his improper conduct. It also emerges that Hori tried to steal 10 rupees from his brother, Hera, who, encouraged by his spiteful wife, then poisons the cow and runs away. When the police come looking for Hera, Hori borrows money to pay a bribe to them and they drop the case, but he also has to pay another fine to the village for the death of the cow. Falling deeper and deeper into debt, Hori borrows the large sum of 200 rupees for his daughter's dowry to arrange a marriage that also clears his land tax debt. His ongoing financial worries and disappointment in his relative's behaviour leads to his death from overwork and distress. As he lies dying, his wife finds that they have only 1 rupee, which she gives to the Brahmin at Hori's funeral, in lieu of a cow. Thus, Hori never fulfils his dreams of donating a cow to the Brahmin or of providing milk for his grandson. Moreover, the large debt of 200 rupees is passed on to his wife and sons.

## Themes

Caste Hori and others suffer from the inequality of the caste system. They are cheated by upper caste money-lenders, landlords and the local Brahmin priest. The rapacious landowner, Rai Sahib, fines Hori for the death of the cow, even though he bears no responsibility for the crime. In an ironical twist of justice, the Brahmin is excommunicated from his caste when he is defiled through contact with an untouchable caste of leather-workers.

Debt While the humiliations of the social system are psychological, financial exploitation ruins lives. Hori falls victim to money-lenders because he is obliged to buy a cow, beyond his means. He is also fined by the village council for things he didn't do. Then he must borrow money for his daughter's wedding. Even men in the city suffer from the exploitative financial system. As Rai Sahib, the rich landlord, explains, 'the government would do us a big favour by confiscating our lands and making us work for a living...We've fallen prey to a system that's completely destroying us. Until we're freed from the chains of wealth, the curse will keep hanging over our heads and we'll never reach those heights of manhood which are life's ultimate goal.'

Love Part of Premchand's progressive message in the novel is to celebrate love and marriage between people of different castes. There are three of these tradition-defying marriages in the story (Gobar and Jhuniya; Matadin and Seliya; Pratap and Saroj). Ms Malati and her lawyer lover also have deep discussions about the subject, in which the author is able to express his own views. One example is this: 'The dawn of married life is rosy with an intoxicating desire whose golden rays illumine the horizons of the soul. Then comes the scorching heat of noon, when whirlwinds blow and the earth begins to tremble. The golden shelter of desire melts away. Stark reality emerges. After that comes restful evening, cool and peaceful, when, like weary travellers, we discuss the day's journey with a detachment as though seated on some high mountain top removed from the clamour below.'

## Characters

Hori The main character is Hori, a kind man who wishes to do good but often lacks courage to pursue it. The irony of his flawed character is demonstrated by his determination to buy a cow, not only for his funeral but also to provide milk for grandson, a noble desire that ends up ruining his life. As the head of large family, and the oldest of three brothers, he also has the responsibility of looking after them. Hori does not question the social system that keeps him near the bottom of the hierarchy and that exploits him economically. He fails to act on his self-professed Gandhian ideals, is violent at times toward his wife and takes a self-serving vow of chastity.

Dhania Dhania is Hori's wife, who is more assertive than him and stands up to injustice. Given her secondary status in society, however, she can do little except attempt to influence her passive husband. She is angry when Hori does not fight back against the exploitative money-lenders and landlords, and she suffers when he beats her in frustration. She is also a loving mother, although she does not exonerate her own son from responsibility for the unmarried girl he gets pregnant. When the author declares that 'tyranny at least creates as spirit of revolt in man makes him conscious of his rights,' he is thinking of Dhania.

Gobar Gobar, the only son of Dhania and Hori, is desperate to escape the poverty that his father accepts as fate. However, he, too, lacks the courage to take responsibility when he gets Jhuniya pregnant and runs to the town. In that new setting, his outlook is widened by contact with more educated and worldly people. He becomes a businessman and looks out of place when he visit the village in his fancy clothes and shoes, but he attempts to expose injustice and fight for equality. His good intentions are somewhat drowned in excessive drinking and ends up as a watchman for Ms Malati.

Rai Sahib Rai Sahib is a rich and powerful landowner, the counterpoint to Hori's low status and poverty. He is also cunning and uses the marriage of his daughter to create political allies and increase his land holdings. Ironically, however, his own son marries against his father's wishes, travels abroad and comes back to win a court case that leaves his father in huge debt, not unlike Hori.

Ms Malati Ms Malati is a European-trained doctor who lives in the city. She is not only intelligent but beautiful, as well, and attracts attention from the male characters in the city. She falls in love with a lawyer because he is equally sophisticated and socially progressive. However, after a visit to Hori's village, she gives up the idea of marriage and devotes her life to serving the poor.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

HORI (Passive)

**Character** Hori, the protagonist of this novel by a progressive writer in the 1930s, is a good but flawed man. His instincts are toward love and generosity, but he is trapped within a traditional social system and warped by the financial system. Unlike other characters in the story, however, he does not question his social status or his financial situation. They are, he believes, his fated lot and remains loyal both to the people who oppress him and to the tradition that reinforces his disadvantaged position. His entrapment and passivity are hinted at by the title, which refers to a Hindu man's obligation to provide the gift of a cow (through his surviving relatives) to the Brahmin who performs his funeral. Hori's belief in the value of this traditional gift and his determination to buy a cow leads to his downfall through a series of debts and misconduct by his family. Despite the arguments from his more intelligent wife and son, Hori never changes his steadfast adherence to the system that kills him. Although he is a loving person and wishes to do good, he has imperfections. He sometimes hits his wife, when she argues with him, and he is smug about the virtue of the Gandhian ideals he expresses.

**Activities** As a farmer, Hori spends a lot time in the fields, preparing the land, sowing seeds and harvesting the crop. As the head of a village family, he also is involved handling family affairs, such as schooling, marriages and petty feuds. As a low-caste peasant, he often seeks help, financial or psychological, from his 'betters'.

## Illustrative moments

Traditionalist When Hori is plagued by debt his son, Gobar, visits him and offers to help, but Hori gets angry and says that it is against tradition (*dharma*) for a father to be supported financially by his son. He tells his son to leave him alone, which he does. Although he is a 'victim', the author shows that he is also a cause of his suffering by his blind adherence to tradition.

**Passive** Hori's acceptance of his low status is evident throughout the novel, but in one moving scene he explains his belief in some detail. His wife challenges him after he meekly acquiesces and accepts yet another exploitative loan. When she says that everyone deserves respect because we are all human beings, he replies, 'Who says you and I both are humans. Where is our humanness? He alone is human who has wealth, power and skills. We are like bullocks that have been born only to be yoked to the plough and to slave for others.'

**Pitiable** There are many scenes which show the pitiable condition of Hori, but perhaps the most moving is that which takes place within a temple. Hori and his wife have come to the town in order to arrange the marriage of their daughter to a rich landlord. Knowing that the groom views the marriage as a financial arrangement, and realising that they are, in effect, 'selling' their daughter, Hori and Dhania go to the temple to make a small offering of fruit to the god in order to gain some peace of mind. The detailed description of his humble offering and his pained face, and the knowledge of what is to happen, is heart-rending.

MS. MALATI (Free-spirited)

**Character** Ms Malati is, in almost every way, the opposite of the pitiable and self-pitying Hori. She is a woman, educated, a doctor, a town dweller and a person in charge of her welfare. Hori is trapped, almost buried, within the traditions on rural north India, whereas Ms Malati has been shaped by her time in London. And, again unlike Hori, she undergoes an important change in the course of the novel. In the beginning she appears to be frivolous and has only a superficial understanding of social problems. But through her deep discussions with the philosopher, Mr Mehta, she begins to develop a sincere appreciation for the need for social reform. She is also flirtatious with Mr Mehta, and when she falls in love with him she appears to forget her ideals. She can be haughty sometimes, especially with other women, and specifically with Mrs Khanna. When Mr Khanna falls in love with her, she does not return his affection, in part because she now considers marriage a trap. In fact, she turns down his offer of marriage and devotes herself wholly to serving the poor. As the person most distant from the traditions of rural India, she is the one most capable of seeing their oppressive nature and of taking measures to combat them. It is not surprising that at the conclusion of the story, she is the only contented character.

**Activities** As a medical doctor, Ms Malati spends most of her time in a hospital, although her work there is not described in the novel. Rather, the author describes her social interactions and long conversations with other people in the town, especially with Mr Mehta. We also see her repel the unwanted attentions of Mr Khanna and dismiss people who are frightened by her free and easy manners.

### Illustrative moments

**Flirtatious** In one of Ms Malati's and Mr Mehta's tête à têtes, we glimpse her frivolity. They are sitting in her drawing room, having tea in the afternoon. Mr Mehta discourses on the philosophy of free love, while Ms Malati fans herself and sneaks a look in a mirror. When he speaks of the beauty of pure emotion, unbridled by social conventions, she opens her eyes wide and beams a smile at him.

**Witty** She is also quick-witted, a skill she says she honed while living in London and which she displays again in conversation with Mehta. When he asks her to marry him, he says, 'I would be honoured to have such an intelligent woman for my wife.' She opens her beautiful eyes wide and replies, 'Oh, yes, my dear Mr Mehta, I'm confident a good wife would be a comfort to you, but perhaps not an intelligent one.'

**Charitable** Ms Malati demonstrates her newfound charity toward the poor when, at the end of the novel, she offers employment to Gobar, Hori's son. With Hori ill, Gobar must support the family, but his ventures into modern business fail. When Malati sees him on the road one day, she tells her driver to stop and asks about his family. After hearing about Hori's condition, she tells him to come the following day and begin work as a gardener.

GOBAR (Rebellious)

**Character** Gobar, the son of Dhania and Hori, is the only character who undergoes significant change in the course of this long novel. In fact, his personal change is a reflection of the wider change that is documented in this fictionalised account of rural life in 1930s north India. Although he is not as prominent as some characters, he is important as a link between the village and the city, the

two setting of the novel. At first, Gobar opposes his father's traditional acceptance of caste and religious barriers; he speaks out against a rapacious landowner; he supports the remarriage of a widow (prohibited by custom); and he embraces the new mill built in the village as a source of a good income. Slowly, however, we watch him fail, in personal moral terms and in financial terms. His most obvious failure is his abandonment of Jhuniya, a girl from another caste whom he has got pregnant. He leaves her and flees to the city, where he begins to make money and dress like a dandy. When he comes back to the village on a short visit, no one recognises him because he wears fancy clothes and shoes. Similarly, although he is vocal in his condemnation of money-lenders, from whom he has suffered, he later becomes a rapacious money-lender himself. In the end, he has a low-status job as a watchman for a rich family. His slow downfall mirrors the moral collapse of society. And yet, he changes once again at the very end, when the author allows him to reflect on life: 'Whatever one's situation,' Gobar thinks, 'greed and selfishness would only make it worse.'

**Activities** Gobar is a restless child from the beginning. He doesn't like working in the field alongside other youngsters of his caste. When he meets Jhuniya, he sets up clandestine meetings with her, usually at night. Later, he and his friends arrange a traditional open-air theatre. Once he has moved to the city, he works hard but also takes to drink. He likes to wear modern clothes and he parades around in them, becoming something of a symbol of success to other young men back in the village.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Rebel** Gobar appears as a social rebel, challenging everything that his father and traditional village culture stand for. He voices his 'modern' views in many scenes, but they are dramatised, quite literally, when he and his friends stage an open-air play. Here, Gobar uses the traditional folk drama form (known as *nautanki*) to satirise a greedy landlord and lecherous priests. The landlord appears with the stereotypical big belly and drooping moustache. He has two wives, and the play shows him pitting one wife against the other, stoking their jealousies and deriving the pleasure from their eagerness to please him. Then, a peasant asks him for a ten-rupee loan. The venal landlord agrees and hands over five rupees. When the peasant points out that there are only five, the landlord says, 'No, there are ten.' 'How is that, sir?' 'There is one for your respect for me. One for writing it down...one for the paper.. one is my customary fee and one for interest, right?' 'Right, but I think you should keep those last five.' 'Nonsense!' 'Yes, sir. One for your younger wife, one for the older one, one, one for betel nut for the younger and one for betel nut for the older. That makes four, and the fifth is for your funeral.' Folk drama, in fact, was often the vehicle for social satire, for skewering the rich and deflating the pompous.

**Corrupted** Gobar the satirist of greed soon becomes Gobar the embodiment of greed. After he goes to the city, works in a mill and earns some money, he himself becomes a money-lender. He specialises in a particular type of loan, in which one loans one's own debt to others and thereby makes interest on it. There is a specific scene in which Gobar traps his friend Mirza into this kind of exploitative loan. Mirza had money but was a habitual drinker who had little understanding of anything, let alone financial transactions. When Mirza needs money to fund his drinking, Gobar does not hesitate to loan him money which he himself has borrowed. Then, he has the tipsy Mirza sign papers that trap into a high interest rate. This is the nadir of Gobar's descent, from the high-minded rebel to a victim of the 'get-rich-quick' mentality of a changing society.