



INVERSION OF POWER RELATIONS: THE REBELLIOUS GOBAR

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Cite This Article: Dr. Laxman Kumar Jain, "Inversion of Power Relations: The Rebellious Gobar", International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education, Volume 3, Issue 2, Page Number 110-112, 2017.

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This paper deals in minute detail how Gobar, Hori's son and another protagonist of Premchand's masterpiece *Godan* brings back the ideas of city in the village that results in inversion of power relationship. But no actual transformation takes place. It brings out the city country relationship at cultural plain, without disturbing the stream of ideas presented by Premchand in his piece.

Gobar returned to his village after one year sojourn in the city which had brought him good fortune. His mother along with his sister was overjoyed and mother felt like finding a jewel she lost long ago in the stress and struggle of life. Her happiness was reflected in her politeness. Her head bowed in utter gratitude. She made it a point to distribute sweets to the whole village in the welcome of her son's arrival. She didn't let her son know of the state of affairs at home but Gobar with a few glimpses had a full view of the situation at home. The torn sarees of Dhaniya, Sona and Rupa clearly indicated ransacking state at home. Jhunia then told him the rest. His blood boiled at the unfair treatment meted out to his father by the community. The 200 rupees in his pocket added fuel to the fire. In a scintillating grandeur, clad in a crisp new cloth, hair combed with extra care, he sallied forth around the village to teach each headman a lesson one by one. This amounted to an inversion of ideas of the legitimate power of domination and subordination.¹ Nothing changed much in the village except Pateshwari had added a room to his house and Jhinguri Singh had dug a well by his door. It was sufficiently provocative to his anger. First turn was that of Jhinguri Singh who was bathing by his well. Gobar passed without greeting and then made an inflated statement about his earning on Jhinguri Singh's initiation. "I didn't go job hunting, Thakur, I'm in business and earn 3-4 rupees daily". Jhinguri Singh sized at him from foot to head. His superior caste status appeared to him of no value before money. He was enormously impressed by Gobar's appearance in the first impression and pleaded him to find some place for his son so that he could have some additional money. Gobar made full use of this appeal. "The greed for easy money had ruined us, Thakur. We don't feel satisfied unless we earn by dishonest means. Honesty is rewarded in the world, not the tricky education". Jhinguri Singh had to swallow hard. How impertinently the boy talked as if Dharma was his private preserve.

Then came Pandit Datadin. Gobar blasted another bomb, "you lack nothing Maharaj. You know how to touch others and knock at their doors, rest is easy. In life and death by imposing fine on others, you rob the poor. Is that money not enough for you or have you hit upon a secret to take it to other world. He had lost his sense of behaving respectfully with elders, Datadin thought. "Gobar doesn't know perhaps that his father is slave at my place. True, a small stream once full soon overflows". Datadin remained unprovoked. Gobar then held out a threat of filing a suit against the panchees. His village brother got so impressed that they wanted Pateshwari's ears to be pulled! Who profited by creating misunderstanding between brothers! But Gobar was in no mood to stay in the village. He asked them to celebrate Holi with a big bang and suggested his village brothers to smear black on headman's face. "Nobody can speak anything on the day of Holi", he added.

Gobar got incensed to know about the loss of their bullock and was not prepared to listen to Hori's moral discourse. Our bullocks were of 100 and he denounced Hori's innocence in abiding to the dictates of community. Dhaniya's restraining voice, "son, in life and death, community..." could not subdue him. "When coffer is full, community and ostracism become silly". Hori's traditional wisdom appeared to him to be defeated before Gobar's intellect. He thought as if his son's wisdom is blossoming. How solidly he talked. Gobar then proceeded towards Bhola's house. Jungi, Bhola's son, typical of country perception of an outsider or city person especially that of city man, was awed by Gobar's smart facade. Seeing the shiny shoes, striped shirt, well combed hair, he looked every inch a Babu and he mistook him for a policeman. Dress is a clear signifier or marker of distinction or superiority and surely a godly appearance loomed large on his ordinary common place living, symptomatic of a kind of power.² With the hope of finding an employment in the city, he became friendly to Gobar and forgot completely the earlier feeling of revenge. Gobar's new found prosperity smothered Bhola's initial fury too. After a brief talk of prospects of finding employment in the city, he returned the bullock

¹ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Chapter 2, Negation, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1983.

² F.G. Bailey: "Bad view of peasant life" in T. Shanin's *Peasant and Peasant Society*, Penguin, U.K. 1971 Anonio Gramsci: Selection from the *Prison Notebook*, op. cit., 1971.

back to Gobar, resolving earlier tension as a family issue. With the words, "I should have felt happy that my daughter is in good house. I grew blind in anger and became thirsty of her blood. God knows son, what happened to me that time".

Festival celebration lies deep in the cyclical movement of peasants' life, especially of crop calendar. Six months out of twelve, one can hear drums and cymbals in one festival or another. They sing 'phaag' in one month advance to Holi. They recite epic of 'Allah' in June. With the advent of rain, 'Kajri' songs take over. Congregation of Ramayana comes later as the cycle gets rounded off. The village of Belari was no exception. The threats of moneylenders and the oppression of the under links of the zamindar can not affect their innate exuberance of enjoying life. No matter if they don't have cloth to wear and food to gulp, their feelings become just irrepressible.

This year Gobar had taken the entire show by holding a Holy Notch at his home. Nokheran's place lay deserted. There was bhang, but no one to drink, drums and cymbals, but nobody to sing. Everybody was crowding towards Gobar's house. He had offered them perfumed tobacco. Even colour was scented with Kewra. He gave special bhang, fragrance with rose water. Saffron and almond had a magical attraction. There was no dearth of singers, dancers and masqueraders in the village. Sobha himself was pretty good mimic and a magnificent ventriloquist. So also was Girdhar, versatile in making parody of lawyer, doctor, police, inspector, rich seth and revenue collector. People were issuing from the neighbouring village right from the evening, a march towards Gobar's house. When Girdhar appeared before the audience with the companion in the garb of Jhinguri Singh the crowd swelled to unmanageable proportions. The same bald headed long moustache and heavy belly, provocative satires with the innovation in the forms and styles of performing was then displayed. His relation with two wives was thoroughly mocked at. His cupidity to exact was equally attacked. In this item, a peasant was shown holding the feet of Jhinguri Singh pleading for 10 rupee loan. After much importunation, Thakur agreed and placed five on to his hand, deducting five in advance for necessary formalities, one for his gratification and one rupee each for writing paper, writing charge, customary fee and advance interest. The peasant returned the rest of the amount to Jhinguri Singh's surprise. "I mean it", said the villager. "One rupee each for the gratification of your two wives, two rupees for buying betel leaves for them and the last one is for your funeral ceremony". The repressed and involuted feeling of the past thus found a full vent in imagination; Bhang had an additional effect. This indicated a kind of mock rebellion by inversion in quotidian sense. Though not falling exactly in the celebrated festival of Easter festival in Europe, and its Indian case, where slave sitting on throne and master at his feet dispensing judgment, here the equation was more of everyday kind, commensurate with the intensity depending on special temporal control of domination and subordination. The last night satires were on everybody's lips. Mukhiya became the target of attack. This didn't leave the headman to rest peacefully. They could be made a laughing stock in their own village - just intolerable, whisper intrigued in the ears. Unsubdued Gobar would create a terror in the village. It was considered as an impingement on their pervasive domination and the moral authority.

Datadin fell short of Divine Raat. He would have reduced them otherwise to the ashes. But alas, divine curse had lost their power in Kalyug. He then came down to mundane tact, shrilled on Hori, to come to his work. Don't you see my work is suffering". Gobar intervened and refused straight. Datadin reminded him of the ways of the world in the village, "You can't leave the work during the season. He is not your slave, he can leave the work when he desires. Gobar brought into play his city wisdom to argue with Datadin. Datadin then demanded his balance back. "Give my money back with interest - amounts to 200/-. If you talk like Dhanna Seth, act in the same way". Gobar showing him the legal niceties and banks taking 1% interest further enraged him. He strikes a horror in Hori's consciousness. "Don't forget' I am a Brahmin. You cannot live peacefully by swallowing my money. I won't go to court either. I will take my 200/- even then. You will come on my door on bent knees" Gobar was unperturbed. But a storm of religious sentiments was disrupting Hori. "No matter if it had been the Bania or Thakur's money but God save from the wrath of the Brahmin. Not a member would be alive". This shows how deeply Hori was drowned in the religious consciousness of the rural world. But we need not stop here. Hori could also see the double power of Pandit Datadin. Priestly power, adding a jest to economic power and thereby loomed large as a threat to his survival. Secondly, a mature Hori could also see the overbearing rebelliousness of his son which could not have affected the stranglehold of the headmen in the countryside. These factors in combination led him to fall at his feet, and thus succeeded in averting Datadin's wrath. Gobar denounced his father's yielding to Datadin's pressure.

"Let me have things my own way, son till I'm alive. One should not leave the track of morality. We have to pay the amount on the agreed rate of interest", acted as a justification.

Nokheram took a little hard trick and sent for Hori, threatened him to evict for the arrears of revenue as he did not issue a receipt.³ At home, Hori started puffing the 'chillum' and informed on Gobar's curiosity that all the headmen were against him. Seventy rupees with interest were on his arrear account and that it all

³ Widely prevalent practice amongst the revenue collectors or headmen for controlling the peasants by not issuing receipts. See Majid Siddiqui, *Agrarian Unrest In North India*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1978.

happened because of Gobar making fun of the headmen. Gobar took his father to task for not sending the money through money-order. He then frightened Nokheram to swear by the holy water of Ganga in the Court and produce hundreds of witnesses from the village that he did not issue receipts to the peasants. Nokheram wilted to his frontal attack. His words had a force of truth. When cement applied to brick makes it as hard as stone. The same cement when applied to soft earth crumbles like dust. In a timid person like Hori the force of truth could not have acquired full expression. For the truth was controlled by the power. Hori could work without it. Note that Hori did not know what is truth and what is untruth, but by allowing it to be controlled by others he could smoothly manage his affairs. He was timid but not a coward. Reaching home, Gobar attacked his father. If a cat mews, you think it is a roar of lion. "How long can I go on protecting you?" And virtually reduced Hori to tears. Gobar's fright of court⁴ to Nokheram could save Hori but the earlier bitterness of Gobar slapping his sister got further widened the gulf. He decided to leave for the city immediately. Dhaniya's appeal brought the undercurrents to the surface, "Even parents love their son for money". These words like a burning scent on her heart scorched all her hopes, and she started reasoning. Jhuniya was the target, as usually cliché goes that daughter-in-law spoiling one's son's ears in affecting the parting of a credulous son. Jhuniya intervened, "nobody comes in this world to die without comfort". Dhaniya fumed that this girl wanted to teach her the philosophy of life. "Don't be so clever. I gave you shelter without thinking and faced all the misfortunes...." They fumed, fought and abused. Village women were siding with Jhuniya, probably she was keeping herself under control and maybe she was the wife of a man of good fortune and to take her side might be good for them. Hori finally intervened, not wanting to expose the home affairs to the villagers and asked Dhaniya to keep mum. Don't expect to be rewarded for what we have done for our children. 47 years of my life have passed, remaining will also pass like that, see them off happily. He asked his son to bow down before his mother who had nourished him with her blood. Gobar refused point blank, "she's not my mother". Hori burst into tears. Gobar was leaving; few villagers accompanied him to the station. Dhaniya sat sobbing as if her most precious treasure had gone beyond recovery and there was no place to even weep. Her house was reduced to ashes. A small family of Hori thus met with alienation.

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1. Ranajit Guha, *Elementary of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Chapter 2, Negation, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1983.
2. F.G. Balley: "Bad view of peasant life" in T. Shanin's *Peasant and Peasant Society*, Penguin, U.K. 1971 Antonio Gramsci: *Selection from the Prison Notebook*, op. cit., 1971.
3. Widely prevalent practice amongst the revenue collectors or headmen for controlling the peasants by not issuing receipts. See Majid Siddiqui, *Agrarian Unrest In North India*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1978.
4. Court and other colonial structures were considered as a trap by the peasantry; see Sumit Sarkar, *Popular Protest and Middle Class Leadership*, Calcutta, 1983.

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