



A Study Awareness of Soordas in *Rangbhoomi* by Munshi Premchand

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Abstract: Premchand published his novel *Rangbhoomi* first time in Hindi in 1925 and he considered the same to be his best work. It came out in Urdu in 1928 under the title *Chaugan-e-Hasti*. It was translated in English in 2011 by Manju Jain and entitled as *Playground*. Because “set against the backdrop of colonial India – characterized by a brutal state, opportunistic, feudal landlords and ruthless capitalists – this novel is a grim account of the blind beggar Soordas’s struggle against the acquisition of his ancestral land.” (Premchand, Backside of Cover page). The novel has many themes intermingled with one-another. The “themes such as industrialization, atrocities committed by princely states, the role of women in India’s independence movement and caste and class hierarchies” (backside of cover page) are still relevant.

Keywords: Justice, Untouchable, Dalit, Exploitation, Society, Caste, Reality.

The Research Paper: The central figure of the novel is a blind beggar Soordas. He belongs to chamar caste of the untouchables. He owns a plot of land in the village Pandeypur near Banaras. The land is used as grazing field by the villagers. Industrialist John Sevak wants to establish a cigarette factory in the same village. The land of Soordas becomes an easy target of Mr. John Sevak as he comes to know that its owner is a blind chamar of Pandeypur. He “is deeply attached to this ancestral plot of land and hopes to build a well and a dharamshala on this plot for this purpose he has saved five hundred rupees out of the alms he collects” (Prasad 21-22). Thus we find first impression of Soordas as

A poor blind chamar, whom people call Soordas, lives in one of these [huts]. Blind men need neither name nor work in India. Soordas is their ready-made name, begging for alms is their ready-made vocation. . . . Soordas was extremely frail, weak and simple. Perhaps destiny has created him only to beg for alms. Every day he would go tapping his stick to sit by the tarred road and implore the welfare of passer-by (1).

We first meet Soordas sitting by the road side waiting for the arrival of an ikka or buggy so that he can beg for alms. He is chatting with a cart-driver named Ganes and suddenly he hears a phaeton approaching. Soordas stands up with the help of a stick. As soon as the phaeton approaches, Soordas cries for alms, “Benefactor! May God make you prosperous!” (3). There are two phaetons on the road. Mr. John Sevak and his wife are sitting on the one while their son Prabhu and daughter Sophia on the other. Soordas runs after the phaetons. Mr. John Sevak runs a leather agency in Pandeypur. He wants to establish a cigarette factory there. Behind the godown of his leather agency, there is a plot of land where the cigarette factory can be established easily. And for that purpose “John Sevak wants to acquire it to start a cigarette factory. [His son] Prabhu Sevak has been sent to America to be trained in this business (5-6). After the measurement of the land Mr. John Sevak asks his accountant Tahir Ali, “Whose land is it?” (6). Tahir Ali tells, “Huzoor this land belongs to Soordas, not to [Nayakram] Panda (8). The sahib asks Soordas about the land and he answers, “Yes Huzoor, it’s mine. This is the only mark left of my ancestors” (8). With the answer of Soordas, Sevak’s worries about the land are over. His purpose is served. He begins his deal with Soordas — “Just give me this land. It will be a favour as well as a gain. I’ll give you as much as you want” (8). Soordas

rejoins, “Sarkar this is the only mark of my ancestors. How will I show my face to them if I sell it?” (9).

Soordas refuses the offer made by John Sevak. He wants that there should be dug a well so that the people can get water easily. His second wish is to build a dharamshala there. Both his wishes are in favour of social welfare. John Sevak again tries to boost the avarice in Soordas. John Sevak sends his accountant Tohir Ali to bargain with Soordas for his land. But he rejects Tahir’s proposal. He tells him “that the land is not for sale” (22). The accountant tries to menace him saying, “I’m telling you again, you’ll be deceived. Sahib is determined to get it” (22). Then Soordas rejoins firmly, “He won’t get it as long as I’m alive. Yes he may well get it if I die” (22). And Tahir Ali goes back without any settlement for the land.

One day Soordas comes across a hot brawl with Bhario, Bajrangi, Jagdhar and Jamuni (Bajrangi’s wife) on the issue of children’s fight. They all tease him and consequently he gets disappointed. When Dayagiri enquires he answers that, “Yes, I’m thinking of selling it and going away somewhere on a pilgrimage. I can’t live in this muhalla any longer” (65). On listening to Soordas’s words Dayagiri tries to make him to understand the situation. He reminds him the duty and responsibility of a good fellow. He consoles him that threats and conflicts are minor things. The value of the land is greater than all other things. Dayagiri’s advice has worked itself and Soordas firmly takes a decision not to sell his piece of land. Tahir Ali becomes angry at Soordas’s stubbornness. John Sevak has decided to establish a cigarette factory there. He meets the raja sahab of Chataari, Mahendra Kumar Singh to grab the land by hook or crook.

John Sevak tries to entrap other men of Pandeypur except Soordas. He tries to arise avarice in Bajrangi, Nayakram, Thakurdeen and Bhairo. Mr. Sevak explains

them that if a factory is established on the plot of land of Soordas then there will be no harm and loss to other muhalla-valas. Instead they will be benefitted. John Sevak becomes successful in his plan. He persuades all the muhalla-valas one by one. They promised to persuade Soordas to sell the land. When John Sevak becomes confident about the output, he goes home happily. He tells his son Prabhu Sevak, “The matter of the land was also settled. There’s no obstacle now in our getting it” (167). When Soordas comes to know the settlement of the land, he asks Nayakram Panda, “You’ve given my land to sahib?” (170). He feels disappointed on the indifference of the muhalla-valas.

One day Prabhu Sevak goes with his sister Sophia to meet Mr. Clark. Sophia is walking behind her brother just a few steps and she hears someone singing on the road. On looking over the wall, she recognises that the singer is the blind beggar Soordas. He is singing a song with a small kharjari in his one hand and a stick in another.

A Christian barrister has been listening to the song of turmoil. He is moved away by his weeping heart. He asks Soordas to tell his story of the land grabbed by the raja sahib and John Sevak. He has been taking so much interest because he is the rival of the raja sahib of Chataari. Soordas rejoins to the barrister, “Huzoor! It was the land of my forefathers. Sevak sahib wants to open a factory for making cheroots there. And raja sahib has grabbed that land from me because he told him to. Sarkar have mercy! Panch have mercy! No one listens to the poor” (236). The Christian barrister enquires Mr. Clark, who has been standing nearby, that it’s wrong to occupy someone’s land for personal profits. Clark says that he has been given very good compensation, unfortunately he has denied to take that. Mr. John Bird, the owner of Kashi Iron Works, Professor Charles Simeon, Mr. Neelmani, the minister for the Kashi Railway Union and others also criticize and condemn the strategy against the

blind beggar. It becomes unbearable for John Sevak to stay there with others. Mr. Sevak's trap gets failed. His secret is no more a secret. He contemplates on his strategy that "the work will begin soon, but it's not easy to silence this wretch. I have split the muhalla-valas – they won't help him – but I had hoped that he would be discouraged when he loses their support" (237).

Raja Mahendra Kumar has limited powers in the Municipal Board. He has requested the members of the board for the approval. After much difficulty the issue of the land is settled. If Soordas does something against him, it is impossible to rearrange the matter, John Sevak and Mahendra Kumar go to Pandeypur to discuss the matter with the muhalla -valas, who have assured them to settle the issue of the land peacefully. Nayakram Panda and Bajarangi tell them that it is impossible for them to make Soordas silent. It is only Subhagi who is in favour of Soordas and she says to the sahibs, "Maalik, I just come to say that a great injustice has been done to Soordas. He'll die if his complaint is not heard" (240). The raja sahib suggests the muhalla-valas to make Soordas understand and remain silent.

Sophia requests William Clark to return the land of Soordas who immediately sends for the file of his land. He makes it read out to him by the deputy sahib and listens to that carefully. Mr. Clark says harshly to the deputy sahib, "I'm the government. I have made that law. I have every right (248-49). He orders the deputy sahib to write a letter immediately to the raja sahib of Chattaari and to send a copy to the local government the next day. He rebukes the deputy sahib and says, "I'm the one who is the master of the district, not the government of the province. If there is an uprising here, I'll have to deal with it, the government of the province won't come here" (249). The deputy sahib informs John Sevak about the changes in the previous order. He becomes gloomy and disturbed. Prabhu Sevak suggests his father to return the land to Soordas. But John Sevak refuses to act upon his advice. John Sevak has decided not to return the land back to Soordas at any cost. His father

Ishwar Sevak advises him, “If you have lost the land, think of a way of acquiring it again, rather than losing your reputation and respect along with it. Go and persuade raja sahib to appeal against Mr. Clark’s decisions” (254-55). Prabhu Sevak knows everything. So Sophia says to him, “Let’s go towards Pandeypur. We can give this news to Soordas if we meet him” (257). On the way near the Bridge of Barna River, there they see a crowd of the people. Soordas is playing on a khanjari and singing the song of his turmoil. Sophia sees him and orders the tonga-vala to stop and “go and call that blind man” (p. 258). Soordas comes to them tapping his stick and bows his head before them. Sophia asks some questions and Soordas answer humbly and the discussion proceeds as:

Sophia – Do you recognize me, Soordas?

Soordas – Yes, how can I not recognize huzoor?

Sophia – You have defamed us in the whole city.

Soordas – What else could I do except complain?

Sophia – What was the result of that complaint?

Soordas – My desire has been fulfilled. The officers have returned my land. It isn’t possible that someone should work with all his being and there’s no reward. You can get God with tapasya. Burra sahib’s orderly came and told me this last night. I have to feed five Brahmans today. I’ll go home tomorrow (p. 258).

Prabhu Sevak tells Soordas that “It’s miss sahib who has persuaded burra sahib and got back your land for you. Her father and raja sahib both are very angry with her. She has a lot of compassion for you” (258). Sophia tells Soordas that the return of his land is the result of his tapasya and not of her recommendations. Soordas’s nature has been changed as well as of the muhalla-valas. He has been disappointed by the behavior of the city officers but they become jealous of him because of his improved

status. But Subhagi's behavior and attitude has been the same towards Soordas. Once she tells him, "I don't respect anyone as much as I respect you. I would have worshipped you with the same devotion if you had been a devata" (276).

Bhairo plays a trick on Soordas. He knows there is enmity between raja Mahendra Kumar and Soordas. He goes to the raja sahib and speaks against Soordas. He says that Soordas has seduced his wife Subhagi. The raja suggests Bhairo to file a case against him. He says, "It's my bench, file a case against him. You'll get witnesses, won't you?" (389). He rejoins, "Huzoor, the whole muhalla knows" (389). But when Bhairo asks the muhalla-valas to be witness in the case against Soordas, most of them decline or pretend to have urgent work or illness and not to go to the court. Jagdhar opines, "Do you think it's a joke to go and testify in court? You have to hold Gangajal, take tulsi leaves; put your hand on your son's head" (394-95). Consequently those, who have children reject Bhairo's proposal. Then he realises that he won't find any witness. He arranges the labourers of the factory of John Sevak as witnesses for toddy as bribe.

The day of the hearing of the case arrives. Bhairo gives his testimony and the hired witnesses give theirs. The court gives its judgment – "A penalty of 200 rupees for Soordas and rigorous imprisonment for six months if he couldn't pay it. A penalty of 100 rupees for Subhagi and rigorous imprisonment for three months if she couldn't pay it" (400). The spectators in the court begin to discuss the judgment. Someone says, "Soordas seems innocent to me" (400). Other one says, "The woman doesn't seem wanton to me" (400). Soordas becomes worried. Suddenly a thought comes to his mind. He cries out to the spectators in the court room. There spreads pin drop silence all around. Raja sahib, the lawyers, the clerks, the spectators, everyone is startled. The sepoys are standing like statues. The situation has taken a drastic change. Raja sahib orders the sepoys to take him out of the court room.

Thousands of spectators follow them. The order is being executed. After a short distance Soordas sits down on the ground and cries, "I'll go on only after hearing the orders of the panch" (401). As there is no fear of the contempt of court outside. Soordas cries and in rejoinder several thousand voices reply. They cry, "You are innocent, we think you are innocent" (401). They again say that the court is dishonest and it is a tool of oppression in the hands of the rich. The court's decision has started a movement in favour of Soordas. The throng of people increase day by day and they believe that Soordas is not guilty. Mithua comes to know the news and he becomes angry. He decides to take revenge upon Bhairo. He sets the hut of Bhairo on fire.

Soordas and Subhagi are released. People have started a procession to welcome Soordas. Indradutt offers the balance money of the total collection to Soordas but he refuses and suggests him to give it to Bhairo to erect his hut again. He takes 300 rupees himself and goes to Bhairo and gives him the money. Bhairo melts away and repents on his deeds of enmity against the blind man in the past. Bhairo's wicked heart is moved by this inner purity of Soordas. He feels sorry for Subhagi. He says that he is "not fit for her" (420). He confesses before Soordas that "I was the one who had burnt your house and stolen your money" (421). Soordas suggests Bhairo, "I want to give you some advice. Why don't you leave the toddy shop and earn living in some other way?" (421). He feels obliged and rejoins; "I'll do what you tell me to. This is a bad occupation. I'm in company of gamblers, thieves and badmash people day and night"(421). Then Bhairo starts a wood shop. The cigarette factory is about to be ready. The machines are got to be installed. In the first attempt, the five bighas of Soordas land was acquired. "The remaining five bighas of Soordas's land had also been occupied by the mill by the same article of the law"(422). Now he regrets that he could not bargain with John Sevak who was ready to give him 5000 rupees. But now he has to get a few hundred rupees. The

process of compensation takes place. Soordas is astonished to listen to the amount of compensation. It is 1000 rupees for his land. He decides, “I won’t go to take the money. Sahib had said he would give 5000, but there’s only 1000, about 150 rupees or more will go in bribes. Sarkar’s treasury is empty, it will now become full” (423). He says, “I will gift the money I have got as compensation to your society” (425).

Kunwar Bharat Singh also favours this decision saying, “I don’t see my objection to acquiring the land by giving compensation to the people of the basti” (435). He denies to oppose the proposal because it will harm the factory. As the factory comes to Pandeypur, many evils follow it rapidly. “The old bazaar of Pandeypur had begun to slow down.... A small brothel had begun to flourish.... There would be a great deal of revelry until ten or eleven at night. Somebody would eat chaat, somebody would stand in front of the paan shop and somebody would joke with the prostitutes. There was a continuous flow of obscene merriment and banter, shameful exchanges of flirtatious glances and lustful blandishment” (507). The children of the basti have adopted bad habits. The muhalla-valas are worried about these evils. In spite of all these social evils “the people of Pandeypur aren’t willing to cease their houses” (530). One day Soordas is hurt by the labourers of the factory because he tries to oppose commenting them on a woman. He could not leave his hut for fifteen days. “Pandeypur’s fate was being decided while Soordas was lying on the sickbed” (535). One morning raja Mahendra Kumar, John Sevak and a land and property assessment officer come to the muhalla. Raja sahib assembles the people of Pandeypur and explains that “Sarkar needs the muhalla for some special government work. It has decided that you people will be given an appropriate price and the land will be taken from you, this is the order of laa sahib” (535). Within the stipulated time, the assessment officer comes and starts his court. The patwari and munshi visit every house for assessment. Mr. Senapati has been appointed the district

magistrate in lieu of Mr. Clark. He suspects that the compensations are announced leniently. The sarkari money can be saved. So he sends the file to the provincial government for approval. The whole property has been examined again. It takes the time of three months. John Sevak comes to the muhalla with Daroga Mahir Ali and some labourers and orders the muhalla-valas to get it vacated. The people request that they have not received any money so how can it be possible to settle somewhere with no money in hand. John Sevak replies their plea, “We are not concerned with your money, take it from whoever will give it to you. The government has promised us that it will get the muhalla vacated on 1 May and if anybody tells us that it’s not 1 May today we’ll go back” (541). The people of Pandeypur become restless. They cry out that they will not vacate their houses before they get their compensation. They say, “This is death without our dying”(541). But there is no impression on the officers. Darogaji gives the order, “Throw away the baggage and vacate the houses immediately. These people need to be kicked; they won’t listen to words” (543). The constables obey his orders and start their dance of devastation.

The process of the distribution of the compensation begins. The patwari begins to read the list of the names. Raja sahib himself distributes the money. The work couldn’t be accomplished in one day so next day is fixed for the remaining distribution of money. Raja sahib comes again at 10 a.m. the next day. Vinay Kumar and Indradutt also reach there to look after the situation. Soordas comes first to take the money. Raja sahib looks him over from head to foot and says, “The compensation for your house is only one rupee, take it and vacate the house” (550). He is astonished to listen to the amount of compensation. He becomes conscious of himself and his mind becomes strong to argue with the raja sahib. He says that I don’t want to sell this land. The raja says, “It’s not a question of what you want, it’s sarkari order. Sarkar needs this land. How can it be that the other houses are pulled

down and your hut should remain?" (550). Mahir Ali is ordered to pull down the hut of Soordas immediately. Vinay Kumar feels restless and frightened to notice the attitude of the public and the police. Indradutt stands on the plinth of a well and tries to cool down the public. He doesn't get an opportunity to say something else, when the superintendent sees the crowd of people at the turning of the lane; he goes there, galloping on his horse. He cries, "Go away immediately, all of you, or I'll shoot" (554). The crowd doesn't move back. The superintendent orders them to go back first, second and third time. The policemen take up their rifles. Raja Mahendra Kumar trembles out of fear and shame because he will be defamed if there happens some bloodshed. He comes to the superintendent panicking and requests, "For God's sake, Mr. Brown, spare me!" (p. 554). But the orders have been given. The smoke covers the crowd. The stones are being thrown at the police by the crowd. "A few branches had fallen but the tree was still standing" (554). Raja sahib again pleads earnestly, "Mr. Brown, these shots are piercing my heart!" (554). But the orders have already been given. "Branches fell, but the tree stood firm" (554). Orders are given third time and raja sahib tearfully bellows with anguished voice, "Mr. Brown, now I am done for!" (p.554). At every shot several people die. This time Indradutt dies with other men. "The trunk of the tree had fallen"(554). There is stampede in the crowd. They begin to run and hide themselves at any safe place. Mr. Brown gives orders fourth time but miraculously no sepoy fires. The havaldar says, "Hazoor has the right, do what you want, but we cannot shot now, we are also human beings, not murders" (555). He threatens the policemen for court-martial and blames them to be traitors. But they don't move to obey him. The crowd goes towards Soordas' hut and this time Vinay is leading it. Soordas is sitting outside his hut with his head bowed as if he is a living radiant image of fortitude, spiritual strength and calmness.

Raja Mahendra Kumar flees away in his car as soon as he gets opportunity. Mr. Brown goes to the district magistrate to consult the situation. Soordas comes to know that because of the movement to save his hut; several men have been shot down. He becomes sad and beseeches Vinay, "I can't bear it that so many homes should be destroyed because of my hut. You can do what you like after I die" (p. 557). Vinay says, "It's not your hut; it's our national temple. We can't sit quietly when we see spades striking it" (p. 557). Soordas says that he will die before his hut gets destroyed. If his hut is vanished in anyway then there will be his funeral pyre with that. He requests the people of the crowd, "I say to you and to all my brothers with folded hands that if any mother's lap has been made desolate because of me, or if any sister of mine has become a widow, I'll set this hut on fire and die burning" (p. 558). Nayakram Panda tells Vinay that he is true to his words. He's sure to do what he says. "By 9 p.m. nine biers and three coffins were raised. Indradutt's bier was in the front and those of the others behind it. The coffins were taken to cemetery. About 10,000 people walked behind the biers, barefoot, with heads bowed. The crowd swelled at every step" (p. 558). The people are not feeling grief or pain. There is no tear in their eyes. There is no feeling of anguish in their heart. On the contrary they begin to feel elated and proud. They feel patriotism in their hearts. There spreads a transcendental silence everywhere. They become conscious of themselves. Now they are not mere puppets in the hands of the sahibs. This is the beginning of the satyagraha.

Soordas has been sitting outside of his hut from morning to evening. The police is mounted near the hut for 24 hours. There is a continuous flow of people coming and going. The volunteers of the organisation of Vinay and Indradutt are also staying continuously with Soordas. Raja sahib and the superintendent of police visit the place once or twice daily. The Gurkha regiment has been summoned to

control the uproar. Two months pass away. The problem is becoming fiercer day by day. The Gurkhas begin to torture the stayagrahis physically. But nobody dares to hurt or shoot the blind man. Nobody dares to touch his hut.

District Magistrate William Clark at last he finds the opportunity to fulfill his longing wish. Seeing Soordas's head above others, Mr. Clark takes his pistol out and fires. The aim happens to be unerring. The bullet hits Soordas's shoulder. Blood begins to flow-out. Bhario cannot hold him up so he falls on the ground. "Spiritual strength couldn't counteract brute strength"(576). On seeing this, Sophia runs towards him. Vinay runs after her to stop her to go ahead because the Gurkhas have made their rifles ready to deal with the public. The crowd also gets, ready to meet the consequences of the riot. As the time passes away, the hut of Soordas becomes a *shaheedgaah* (a place of martyrs) for the muslims and a *tapobhoomi* (a sacred grove of ascetism) for the Hindus. Soordas becomes serious in the hospital. The news of Soordas's death spreads everywhere within seconds. "He was cheerful when he won and cheerful when he lost, he didn't harbor a grudge against the victor, if he won he didn't ridicule the defeated" (604).

After six months, Soordas's statue has been brought from Poona. It has been purposed that the statue should be installed where was his hut. John Sevak gives the permission happily. There is a general ceremony at Pandeypur basti. People come and join the festival. Rani Jahnavi installs the statue with tender voice and tearful eyes. A devotional song has been sung by the people. "This was Soordas's great victory" (621). Something unusual and abnormal happens there the same night when:

Half the night was over. A man came close the statue on a cycle. There was an instrument in his hand. For a moment, he

looked at the statue from head to foot and then struck a blow at it with the same instrument. There was the sound of the cracking of whip and the statue fell on the ground with a bang on top of the very man who had broken it. He was perhaps about to strike a second blow when the statue fell on him, he couldn't run away, he was buried under it (621).

The man, who attacks the statue of Soordas is none other than the raja sahib of Chataari. For all his life he had been defeated by Soordas and he got defeat by his statue also. Raja sahib's death is also defeated by Soordas's death. "As long as he had lived, he had looked below Soordas; even when he died, he was buried below him. Traitor to the country, enemy, hypocrite, impostor, he was discussed with these and even harsher words" (621). The craftsmen repair the statue and make it stand again "But the marks of that blow are still there on the feet and the face too has become distorted" (621).

Conclusion: The novel *Rangbhoomi* opens with Soordas and ends also with him. He is a Dalit but his awareness can't be said Dalit awareness. Therefore it can be said that Soordas of *Rangbhoomi* is not a Dalit. He is a harijan. So he follows the ways of Gandhi. Premchand's son Amrit Rai writes that "Surdas is the ideal satyagrahi and one can clearly see a resemblance between Gandhi and him" (Trivedi 199). Madan Gopal writes that "The boldest characterization is that of Surdas [Soordas], the Gandhi like hero of the novel" (210). Most of the critics of novels agree at one point that Soordas is a Gandhian protagonist. He is not an Ambedkrite. So his awareness can't be termed as Dalit awareness rather it is harijan awareness.

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