



Champions of the Oppressed: Charles Dickens, Premchand, and Lu Xun.

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This world has never seen inhumane oppression of the poor common men by the hands of oppressors, in such magnanimity and severity as after the dawn of industrialisation in the 19th Century. As this machine monster spread its crooked roots in the entire world, it sucked not only natural resources but also humanity itself. Industrialisation and Marxism were the two poles which were revolutionizing the whole world during nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Literature was also profoundly affected by these two dynamic forces that got manifested in the works of major writers like Carlyle, John Ruskin, Mathew Arnold, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, Charles Dickens, Premchand, Lu Xun etc. These writers were either writing about the repercussion of Industrialisation or sought the way out from various kinds of oppression through socialism, Marxism and communism. They were champions of the social, economic and national issues that were imparting pain to the entire humanity like blisters. Apart from these two forces and yet coherently connected were other issues like colonialism, imperialism, religious malpractices, social backwardness, caste division etc. which were under the churning process of social reform and freedom from servitude. This article is an honest attempt to study the struggle and contribution made to liberate the world from inhumane oppression of the poor, down-trodden, and weaker sections of the society with an utopian idealism to establish a class less society by three major novelist: Charles Dickens, Premchand and Lu Xun.

After fourteenth Century, all the major revolutions came from the West that influenced the entire world. Industrialisation was one of them. It was the result of capitalism, which grew in Europe during 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. European continent or the so called Western countries have never been blessed with natural affluence as Eastern countries like India. Their scarcity led them to explore new world through sea ways and establish large colonies and a new mercantile economy, fully controlled by government. But later on, Adam Smith's theory of Capitalism progressed, which was based on the idea of free trade and competition with lesser role of government also termed as *Lessez-faire* capitalism. Naturally enough, capitalism aimed at investing only on the area of profit-giving entity, not only such unprofitable works, which are meant only for the welfare of humanity. This mercenary and profit seeking attitude, resulted in an unbalanced society and spearheaded resentment among commoners. It gave birth to a new kind of oppression that was bereft of human sympathy and sensitivity. Its aim was only to seek profit at any cost. The growing chasm between the rich and the poor ensured way for such philosophies as Socialism and Marxism. Karl Marx was the pivotal force that changed the perception of world about human history as class struggle and labelled all religion as "opium of the world", where the oppressed does not feel the oppression. Lu Xun has termed such concealed oppression as 'cannibalism' in his famous work, "Diary of a Madman".

Industrialisation, on the one hand, caused rapid economic growth in European Countries, especially in Britain (because this was based on savage exploitation of their colonies' natural and human resources), while on the other hand divided the society into Aristocrats, Bourgeois and Proletariat class. It also proliferate theft, robbery, prostitution, child labour, domestic violence and alcoholism in society. Farmers were turned labourers, living in extremely unhygienic colonies and worked for more than eighteen hours a day. All these evils of industrialisation became the root cause of rise of Socialism. The country which first reaped the benefits of Industrialisation has to also bear the burnt of its ill effects first. Hence, Britain became the centre of not only Industrial revolution and imperialism but also of social reformations. Any revolution has its literary base and this revolution of social reformation was led by Charles in Britain.

Charles Dickens is not a contemporary of Premchand and Lu Xun; their cultural background is also very different. Even the social problems, their respective countries were facing, were, too, not similar, yet one thing that binds them is that they all were the leading novelists, championing the under privileged, weaker sections or Oppressed class of their society. No doubt, being the precursor of Premchand and a great Victorian novelist, Premchand would have been influenced by his art and thought just like Karl Marx, who was a great admirer of Dickens because he has brought out the pitiable conditions of the labourers, sensitivity of thieves and the inhumanity of the so called Aristocrats. Charles Dickens has given us myriad of characters through which he openly comments on the various kinds of abuses and oppression prevalent in the Victorian world predominated by industrialisation. Like Matthew Arnold, Dickens believes in literature as "criticism of life" and says that one cannot shut his eyes to the social evils, injustices rampant in society. Behind his empathy for the poor and disadvantaged sections of English society, was his own childhood's bitter experiences of which we find moving portraiture in his semi-auto biographical novel, "David Copperfield." In fact, all his major novels, including 'Pickwick Papers' bear glimpses of his own childhood sufferings. Those memories were so deeply sown in his mind that he could never get rid of them. His minute details and deep observation of child labour, prostitution, inhumane labour laws, un-hygienic living condition, shams of Aristocrats and humanity of the so-called robbers, thieves and poor people were a direct result of the un-obliterating impact of brutal experiences of his childhood. Writing about his bitter experiences he says, "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sank into this the deep remembrance of the sense I had of being utterly neglected and hopeless; of the shame I felt in my position....My whole nature was penetrated with grief and humiliation of such consideration that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wonder resolutely back to that time of my life." (Letter to Forster) (Dickens 14)

Charles Dickens was very harsh on the evils that Industrialisation and Capitalism brought to the English society. 'Hard Times', dedicated to Thomas Carlyle, was considered as one of Dickens' greatest novels by John Ruskin, G.B. Shawl and F.R. Leavis. As the title itself suggests that Victorian Era was a period full of hardships and turmoil due to industrialisation. Dickens, with his artistic skilfulness and insight into his characters, portrays such immortal characters as Bounderby and Gradgrind, Louisa Cecilia Jupe (Sissy). While Bounderby and Gradgrind are the embodiment of mechanical society, without heart, which lays stress on education system that focuses only on facts and statistics, leaving no space for imagination. Bitter is product of such education system that turns human into machines without soul and emotions. For him everything is profit and self-interest. Louisa is a tragic victimized of Gradgrind's Utilitarianism that reduces human life to statistical averages. She and her family are saved only by Sissy Jupe who symbolises vitality, generosity and un-calculating goodness of human heart. She belongs to humble family of circus-people whose daily activity is to entertain people for entertainment's sake. Surely this profession is far from the scientific mechanization, holding artistic values essentially for human heart. Dedication of the novel to Carlyle, speaks volume about the intentions of the author behind writing this novel. Here, Dickens takes on his attack the Laissez faire capitalism, Jerry Bentham's 'Utilitarianism' and heartlessness of cash-nexus as the only link between labour and capital. He attacks the unsatisfactory relationship between labour and capital. He attacks the unsatisfactory relationship

between labour and capital. He attacks the callousness of factory owners and pig-headedness of trade unionized. But broadly speaking, the novel is another tale of the oppressor and the Oppressed. In this regard G.B. Shaw's viewpoint is worth coating,

“ Here you will find no more villains and heroes, but only oppressors and victims, oppressing and suffering in spite of themselves, driven by a huge machinery which grinds to pieced the people it should nourish and ennoble, and having for its directors the barest and most foolish of us instead of the noblesse and most far-sighted.”

Dickens's "Hard Times" and Premchand's "Rangbhoomi" can be compared on two points: first, they strongly condemn oppression through industrialisation and landlords; second, they establish supremacy of heart over mind. The list of such novels that voice his trenchant comments on social evils spawned by industrialisation and Capitalism are "Oliver Twist", " Nicholas Nickleby", " Black House" etc. Through them, Charles Dickens helped raise mass awareness to the atrocities inflicted upon the poor and later on became an indirect reason for the series of legal reforms, like abolition of the inhumane imprisonment for debts, better management of criminal prisons, and the restrictions of the capital punishment. One of the cruellest forms of oppression is the child abuse which can send chill to our nerves. In Victorian Era, when colonialism was at its pinnacle, all sorts of cruel child abuse was prevalent. Humanity can not fall lower than this. Dickens has stripped open the naked reality of so-called gentlemen society of England by drawing heart rending pictures of orphanage, where orphans were cruelly tortured and deliberately kept under-fed.

The slum houses, warehouses and the cheap boarding schools became the place for smothering the innocence and sweetness of a child. "Oliver Twist" and "Nichlas Nickleby" are such novels which can be read as textbooks or documents of Victorian Child abuse. Recently, we have read about heart-breaking and distressing news regarding finding of a Graveyard of 215 indigenous children at Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada, which in turn confirms such atrocities, because it belongs to that period when Canada was a part of British Colony. These lines from "Oliver Twist" are worth considering here to get a peek into the Victorian brutality, when the orphans were considering here to get a peek into the Victorian brutality, when the orphans were given a single scoop of gruel for a meal, an one day Oliver , the little protagonist, dares to ask more and is severely punished, "The evening arrived; the boys took their places. The master, in his cook's uniform, stationed himself at the copper; his pauper assistants ranged themselves behind him; the gruel was served out; and a long grace was said over the short commons. The gruel disappeared; the boys whispered each other, and winked at Oliver; while his next neighbour nudged him. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: ' Please, sir, I want some more.'"5

Such barbaric and sadistic acts on children have shaken the conscience of Victorian people. Dickens somewhat succeeded in turning the wheel of reformation in these areas. His novels compelled the intelligentsia to rise and become vocal against such atrocities, disorder, decay, squalor, and blight. Dickens' novels triggered future debate and reformation in laws , town planning, Pollution, health and safety measures in factories and a human education system.

As I mentioned above, West has been highly influential in the geo-politics of the entire world after 14th century. European colonies were primarily based on trade but later on took a shape of oppression, not only economical but also social, cultural, religious and mental. Behind this, theory of Capitalism, Industrialisation, and White Supremacy were working. In Africa, the atrocities went to the inhuman level of ' Slave Trade'. India, which was called " the golden bird", saw oppression on different levels. But the severity of oppression was suffered by, farmers the most because India was primarily an agrarian society and European Industrialisation bloomed on the extortion of our farmers. They forced the peasants to grow cash crops providing raw materials for industry to grow in England. Sadly enough, the Indian Landlords played a major role in it by covertly supporting the British Officials. They became the intermediaries between the colonial

rulers and peasantry, having a right of tax collection. The upper cast were involved in oppressing the poor and the landless farmers in the past too, but their oppression was mild and humanly. Under the British Raj things started changing. Western capitalistic influence, mercenary attitude and selfishness of the landlords or 'zamindars' together took the oppression to an extreme level where the simple farmers where the simple farmers were unable to bear its yoke and ultimately loses his life, like "Hori." Munshi Premchand's "Godan", is an epic tale of the oppression of Indian farmers at the hands of the colonial system, zamindari pratha, mahajani pratha, capitalism and industrialisation. Raisahab, of "Godan" is an example of such a breed. Most of the peasants became landless and soaked so much in debt that, according to a data, even their children

Were born in debt.⁶ To pay taxes to the government, the peasants have to borrow money from the money lenders. Hence, this compounded the problem because indebted peasants could not be agricultural producer. Marx and other scholars have considered British imperialism, laissez-faire capitalism and Malthusian theory about population behind the planned destructions of self-sufficient village society of India.⁷

In such a grim situation of Indian peasantry, Premchand rose as the biggest champions of farmers. Although, he has taken into his compass other kinds of social issues and oppressions prevalent in the society like child marriage, plight of women, prostitution, poverty of common man, caste system of India, weakness of kings, imperialism, Industrialisation, Urbanisation etc. but the depth and minuteness of his details about the life of farmers, in all its facets and dimensions are very hard to be found in any other writer, be it Gorky, Tolstoy, Lu Xun or Dickens. On the surface, Premchand appears to be a Marxist, but a little deeper, he is more a socialist. In India, the oppression is not only restricted to classes, but also among various castes and within the family, which is nourished by religious superstitions and backwardness. To read Premchand is like meeting the peasants and Indian common men and women in all their flesh and blood. His realism is such that one can feel the 3D experience of almost standing on the land of an Indian farmer.

Premchand has a balanced approach between realism and idealism. His realism is not based on exposing everything in a hideous manner to divide but to unitedly in making us realise the underlying humanity. For Indian society, Premchand knew that a communist or Marxist revolution would never be successful as in China or Russia because Indian society is far more complex and elder as compared to any other country in the world. That is why, he desired a socialistic revolution which would construct a society free of Capitalistic oppression and based on moral and ethical values. He has vehemently negated even Industrialisation, which brings social evils in our society in "Rangbhoomi". His idealism was a class-less, and oppression free society but in order to achieve that he never compromised with his realism. 'Godan' is his best literary work, because here he did not try to draw an idealistic conclusion to the problems. But his earlier novels, like "Rangbhoomi", "Karmbhoomi", "Premashram" and "Kayakalp" do try to search for a romantic world of idealism without which this world would be a bitter place to live in. If the idealism or hope is snatched from us then the humanity will sink in an abysmal of doom and depression.

Premchand, through his novels, has given us a realistic picture of the types of oppression that was eating farmer. If his "Premashram" depicts the rise of new kind of Feudal lords, Landlords that suck the blood of farmers in the form of tax and send it to foreign lands; then his "Godan" is a cruel reflection of Indian Pawnbroker who entraps poor farmers in a never-ending chain of loan. The difference between the old and new landlords is represented through Premshankar and Gyanshankar of "Premashram" by Premchand. Both are from the same family but Gyanshankar is an epitome of western education which has taught him to think from mind not heart; to become selfish Utilitarianism whose only motive is to earn money whether by inhumane oppression or even by killing the poor. At the same time Premshankar keeps the flame of love burning in his heart which treats poor farmers with compassion. Premshankar's these words can also be called Premchand's own view which unfolds the reality of peasants-

“पारिश्रमी तो इनसे अधिक कोई संसाि में न होगा। उनकी दरिद्रता का दायित्व उनपि नहकं, बल्कक उन परिस्थितियों पि है,

लिनके आिन उनका िीवन व्तिीत होता है। “इन तमाम परिस्थितियों के मूल में “वहक संथा है, ल्सिका अत्यतत्व कृषकों के िक्त पि अवलंबत हैं। आपस में वविोि क्िों है? दुव्ियवथा के काणि, ल्सिकी इस वतयमान शासन ने सृष्टि की है। पिथपि प्रेम औ ववश्वास क्िों नहकं? इसललए क्िोंकक िह शासन इन संभवनाओं को अपने ललए घातक समझता है औ उन्हें पनपने नहकं देता। इस पिथपि वविोि का सबसे दुखद फल क्िा है? भूलम का क्रमशः अत्िंत अकप भागों में ववभाल्ति हो िाना औ लगान की अपरिलमत वृद्धि।”⁸

‘Pawnbrokers’ are the Hyenas who eat their prey alive. Premchand, through ‘Godan’, has dexterously exposed their multi-layered hypocritical nature. They are not one or two but many in our society. If one has a handful of money, one can easily multiply it by lending it on interest to those poor who are the worst affected by this system but still adhere to their religion, morals and humanity. It is the easiest way to earn money. There are many types of pawnbrokers in “Godan” like Datadin, Mangum, Jhingru Singh, Nokheram etc. They have their share in even the hard-earned money of Hori and other peasants.

“Girdhar wobbled towards them, staggering under the influence of toddy. Hori uncle, Jhenguri took away all my money. He had not left me even a piece to buy parched grain with. The murderer I whined, I wept! But there is no pity in that renegde’s heart.”⁹

They leave only that much in which their prey does not die so that their source of income does not stop. When Hori has to pay as fine Rs.100 for keeping the widow Jhunia as his daughter-in-law, he has to keep his house at stake to pay the money.

“Nokhey Ram wanted him to sell the bullocks. But Pateshwari and Datadin argued that if he sold the bullocks, how could he plough his land?”¹⁰

There is nexus between landlords and money lenders as both are mutually beneficial to each other. One lends money to the farmer on interest which the farmer then plays, as tax, to the landlords. “Godan” is an epic tale of the endless torture of a poor farmer who is bound by his believe in religious superstition that after death, godan will ensure his soul’s liberation to heaven. This is another kind of oppression that religious stakeholders use for the monetary benefits. Premchand proves that nothing is Supreme in the ‘Kalyug’ than money. And this ‘kalyug’ is ‘kal’ (machine) + ‘yug’ (age) i.e. Industrial age which is the gift of the western civilization.

If ancient religions, like Hinduism or Confucianism, have nourished humanity then they have also been misused for exploitation by the powerful. Marx has called it religious opium while, the Chinese’ great modern writer, Lu Xun has called it “Cannibalism”. Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman”, written in vernacular, was a revolutionary text in many senses. First, it established Lu Xun as a prominent contemporary writer of China with revolutionary ideas. Second, this text was like a diagnosis of diseased Chinese society. Thirdly, it marks a new kind of writing style which introduces medical science in literature. It is a unique satire or parable on Chinese society which underlines “Lu Xun’s paradoxical brand of nationalism (passionate attachment to, yet disgust with China).”¹¹ This style was going to dominate almost all his later works where he seems to dissect Chinese people and society all the time but never giving any medication.

Just like Dickens and Premchand, Lu Xun had bitter experiences in his childhood and he has closely watched the hardships of poverty and feckless of human nature which kept recurring in his short stories. After initial success in civil service examination, based on knowledge of classical text of Confucian, Lu Xun showed his back to such

examination which stifled Chinese science and technical knowledge. China was going through an internal revolution against his weak Quing dynasty, rampant corruption, imperialist pressure by western powers and Japanese, ‘Cultural Humiliation’ after Opium War and Boxer Rebellion led to a rebellion against Quig Dynasty and in 1911, the Xinhai Revolution ended a 2000 years old imperialism rule and established Republic of China. But soon China entered into a series of civil wars because of war lords which divided China into many parts. Lu Xun was filled with utter sadness over the pitiable condition of Chinese society. He realised that “China was no longer the centre of the civilized world, but one nation among many struggling for survival in global system dominated by the West.”¹² He felt a need for social awakening through “literary movement” against the repressive social customs and oppressive semi-colonial conditions. He shuns his medical studies in Japan, in between and returned to his mother land only to awake his sleeping countrymen by making art and literature as ‘vanguard of the Revolution’.

“However rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything other hand cannon fodder or gawping spectators The first task was to change their spirit ; and literature and the arts, I decided at that time were the best means to this end. And so, I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform.”¹³

The initial failings disappointed him much and he almost went to a state of depression and hopelessness. He realised that futility in raising a slumbering mass who has accepted things and are not ready to wake.

“ Imagine an iron house: without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers- all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die?”¹⁴

But, as Dickens and Premchand had their idealism, so was Lu Xun’s hope. “however hard I tried, I couldn’t quite obliterate my own sense of hope. Because hope is a thing of the future.”¹⁵

That is how, Lu Xun’s masterpiece, “Diary of a Madman” (“Kuangrenriji”), modelled on Russian realist Nikoly Gogol’s tale of the same title, came which underlines his utter frustration at the rampant corruption that is slowly eating up human beings. The traditional Confucian culture has mingled in the blood of the Chinese society so much so that it has turned into a man-eating society and they don’t see anything abnormal and inhuman in it. Confucianism is filled with oppression but this oppression works like sweet poison, leading the Oppressed to death without his being realising it. “People have been eating each other since ancient times. When flick through the history books, I find no dates, only those fine Confucian principles ‘benevolence, righteousness, morality’ snacking their way across each page. As I studied them again, through one of my more implacable sleepless nights, I finally glimpses what lay between every line, every book: ‘Eat people!’”¹⁶

Indeed, to understand the power game of world, one has to turn a little mad or this world itself is mad? The question still hangs and the author can only hope that at least our children should be saved from turning into Cannibals.

Another major work of Lu Xun is “ The True Story of Ah Q” (“A-Q Zhengzhuan”) which has become a symbol like Oliver Goldsmith’s ‘Beau Tibbs’ , characterising Chinese penchant for rationalizing defeat as a “spiritual victory”. Ah-Q is an everyman Chinese, with queue, wore as a symbol of servitude to Dynasty, who considers himself “a worm” in front of powerful but does not feel to beat one who is less strong than him. “Ah-Q ... the national character: its obsession with face; its superiority complex; its servility before authority and cruelty towards the weaker; its conceited delight in ignorance”¹⁷ has exposed not only Chinese society but on the large extent humanity itself. This is how men like to oppress the weaker and the vicious chain of oppression never ends.

Though, Lu Xun, through his art and medium of vernacular language, remained successful in arising men from their slumber, encouraged people to join Chinese Communist Party but never wanted to be called a communist. He was one of

the leading literary rebels of the New Culture Movement which promoted western science and democracy, vernacular literature, end of Patriarchal Confucian society, and encouraging individual freedom and women's liberation. He was highly influenced by western philosophies, especially by Dickens, Huxley, Marx etc. and tried to draw out the venom from his society like a saint. He writes, "I have stolen fire from other countries to cook my own flesh, if its tastes good, those who chew it may get something out of it, and I have not sacrificed my body in vain."¹⁷

Ever since the beginning of the Christian Era, human race has underwent so many revolutions and reformations, but the world seems no better a place for the poor and oppressed. They are still on the lowest rung of the society where nothing but dross reach for them to survive. With every revolution, it appeared that, now, the world would reach for them to survive. With every revolution, it appeared that, now, the world would reach an ideal state of equality or so-called 'Utopia' but we failed miserably. The pity of our failure is that with each new revolution/ reformation, the powerful becomes more powerful and the weaker weak. All the great social leaders, in reality, never succeeded in reducing the gap. In reality, whether consciously or unconsciously, they have only increased the chasm between 'the two worlds'. This sad future is somewhat foreseen by Sophia in "Rangbhoomi" who declares in despair that if this is the result of education and revolution then it is better to remain in serfdom; what solid can we gain by Independence? Lu Xun, too, realized the cruel fact of human civilization. The mad man states in his diary that the entire history is filled up with incidents of Cannibalism and it has increased in his time. He says that if his brother is not at all affected by the killings of man by man then there is no doubt that one day, he would also kill him. Here we are unconsciously reminded of Nida Fazli's famous lines-

“मुझे धगिा के अगि तुम संभल सको तो चलो।“

Had not T. S. Eliot wept on the 'waste land'? Had not Yeats forecasted the 'second coming', a horrible picture emerging from his Spiritus Mundi of a lion with man's face? Is not IMF the biggest 'Mahant' sucking the blood of the poor countries? Are not Democracy and Globalisation new religion of oppression, providing more opportunity for the oppressor under the cover of equal opportunity? Does not the west still rule the world through its soft power and we are still their slave? Is not the present world still suffering with the same disease, as it wreathed in Premchand's era? How flickering was Lu Xun's hope that the spirit of cannibalism should not pass to our children. Premchand dare not give a happy ending to "Godan" as he slipped to do in his other novels. These writers were not only the writers of their age but also of future. They not only wept for their fellow countrymen but also over the plight of humanity on the larger scale. They could not only see in past and present but also could peep into the future which is filled with hopelessness. Though, their efforts did not go in vain as Europe has changed and improved so much in terms of its labour laws, poor laws, child abuse, criminal laws etc. China has improved its per-capita income but muffled the voice of citizens. In India, where Premchand wished everybody to turn 'Premshankar' or 'Surdas' for this place to become a salubrious place to live, where everybody would have highlighted moral values, but the fact remains that only a few are 'Surdas' and even such 'Surdas' will have to beg on road and hear people's scold. The false will ever rise to prosperity. No doubts, writers such as Charles Dickens, Premchand and Lu Xun championed the voice of the oppressed but they, too, knew that this world will always remain divided between oppressed and the oppressor because the race of human suffers with a fatal disease of 'Cannibalism'. New revolution would come only to usher in a new change but soon the oppressor would find new ways for oppression. Only if all humans can stick to the religion of humanity, listen to their hearts and do not get led away by their blind selfishness, we can eradicate oppression but this is as difficult as searching for God.

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