

Shrilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* as a Satirical Masterpiece

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Abstract

Shrilal Shukla is considered a prominent writer in Hindi literature. He is a well known satirist. He worked as a PCS officer for the Government of Uttar Pradesh and an IAS officer for the Government of India. This paper is an attempt to read his fiction *Raag Darbari* (1968) as a satire. It is a socio-political satire. It is an attack on contemporary social and political situation. Village politics has been satirised in this novel. It also shows the pathetic condition common man and attacks on the bureaucracy. It is written against the background of an imaginary village, Shivpalganj. It explores the rural life of post-independence India with a satiric tone and presents prevailing corruption in every section of the society. It is a satire on corrupt politics and moral degradation. The political leader of the village has been satirised for his corrupt political activities.

Key words: Post-independence India, political satire, corruption, political novel

Satire is subgenre of literature that is written in prose as well as in poetry. It attacks on the vices and follies of a person or society with a purpose to reform. A satirist uses several techniques such as humour, wit, irony and ridicule etc. to expose the shortcomings. *Raag Darbari* was written originally written in Hindi and published in 1968. Shrilal Shukla was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for this novel in 1970. It has been translated in to English under the same title by Gillian Wright and published in 1992 by Penguin Books. It was also published in 15 Indian languages other than Hindi by National Book Trust, India. It has been adapted as a Television Series and telecasted on DD National from 1986 to 1987. The main theme of the novel is the corrupt political and administrative system prevailing in Post-Independence India. It is divided into thirty-five chapters. It is set in 1950s in an imaginary north Indian village Shivpalganj and deals with the lives of the villagers and local politician living there. It exposes their hypocrite life style.

Raag Darbari is a satirical masterpiece. Francesca Orsini writes, "While *Raag Darbari* is recognized as a satirical masterpiece, received the annual prize of India's National Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi) in 1970, and has never been out of print since publication, it is yet to be recognized as a literary classic" (*Raag Darbari*, VII). It presents the failure of moral values in post-Independence Indian villages. It reveals the helplessness of the intellectuals and irrelevance of their knowledge in a corrupt and administrative system, "Educated people in India occasionally become afflicted with certain disease which is known as 'crisis of conscience'. And among them, this disease generally attacks those who consider themselves intellectuals" (*Raag Darbari*, 150). Shukla also raises questions on the quality of the theses:

Some government board will give you a miserable ten-rupee grant and then twist your ear to make you write whichever thesis it likes. Wherever you look, people are grabbing some research project or the other. They say they're doing research? They just sing the praises of whoever is paying them. And what

are they called? Let me see, what's the word? Yes, I remember.... They are called "intellectuals". (*Raag Darbari*, 197)

Rangnath is the protagonist of the novel. He has passed Master of Arts in Ancient History and is a research scholar at present. He visits his maternal uncle Vaidyaji's house at Shivpalganj in order to recover from an illness. Vaidyaji is an Ayurvedic doctor. He lives there for five-six months and recovered from his illness. He had come there with an idyllic vision of village life but is disgusted with the village politics and corruption. He finds his textbook learning irrelevant there and wants to return his own town. He feels that he has become one of the henchmen of Viidyaji while living there, "It seemed to him that living with Vaidyaji had made him a member of a gang of dacoits" (*Raag Darbari*, 150). The Principal offers him the post of Lecturer in History in the school but he refuses to join the post because this post was related to Khanna Master who had been forced to resign unjustly.

The title of the novel is very significant which shows the political prominence. Vaidyaji is the political leader of the village. He is the mastermind behind all village politics. He is a shrewd politician and counters every challenge to his authority by hook or by crook. He gets his servant Sanichar elected as the Pradhan of the village in order to keep the village under his control. He forces Khanna master and Malaviya master to resign. Gillian Wright writes:

The title itself reveals the political emphasis of the plot. *Raag Darbari* is the name of one of the most difficult ragas of Indian classical music, but Shrilal Shukla has taken its meaning literally-the melody of the court. In the novel it refers to the tune sung by the courtiers of a latter-day local raja, that is to say, a village politician. The court of the title is presided over by Viidyaji, a Brahmin Ayurvedic doctor who is the political mastermind of his village, Shivpalganj. The story set in the late nineteen-fifties, describes his struggle for political control of Shivpalganj, a fictional village typical of the Raebareli district, south-east of Lucknow. (*Raag Darbari*, XXIV)

Shrilal Shukla criticises the contemporary education system in India, "The present education system is like a pariah bitch lying on the road, whom anyone can kick" (*Raag Darbari*, 7). Changamal Vidyalaya Intermediate College, Shivpalganj was established to motivate the students by proving them the best education, "The Changamal Vidyalaya Intermediate College was founded to 'inspire the youthful citizens of the nation with great ideals and, by providing them with the best education, to make them means of the country's uplift'" (*Raag Darbari*, 74). But the teachers as well as the students are divided into several rival groups. The teachers are not devoted to teach and the students are not dedicated to study. Principal Sahib is the Head of the college. Vaidyaji is the manager of the college. Ruppen Babu, Vaidyaji's son describes the condition of the college in the absence of the Principal and suggests him to appoint Khanna master as vice-principal, "I have no sympathy for Khanna, but I think, it's necessary to have a vice-principal here. When you are not here, all the masters fight like cats and dogs. I can't describe the hooliganism that goes on in the masters' common room. The same *hain-hain, tain-tain, phain-phain*. It's a common bedlam" (*Raag Darbari*, 79). But the Principal is not ready for it. The teachers and the Principal are engaged in political activities and the students read film magazines in the classroom. Principal Sahib tries to show himself a disciplined and idealistic before Khanna Master. He threatens him and says:

'This is the level of discipline in your class! The boys are reading film magazines! And on the strength of this, you're getting pressure put on me to make you vice-principal? Bhaiya, if tha' goest on like this tha' canst forget vice-principal. Next year I'll damn well see thee out on the street, with no job!' ... 'What is there in education? The important thing is discipline! Understand, Master sahib?' (*Raag Darbari*, 23)

Principal Sahib is not an idealistic person. He is an opportunist. He gives his logic in favour of democracy to counter Sanichar but after five years, he is not in the favour of the election for the Manager of Changamal Vidyalaya Intermediate College, Shivpalganj. He opposes the election which is the essential for a healthy democracy. He says, “What can I say? The things Vaidyaji does sometimes. Where was the need for this election...”(*Raag Darbari*, 142)? He is a flatterer of Vaidyaji. When Vaidyaji gives him instruction to call a meeting regarding the election for the post of the manager of the school, he tries to flatter him:

The next day, the Principal was instructed by Vaidyaji to call the annual meeting of the college and to hold elections for the post of the manager as well as those of the other office-bearers. The Principal tried hard to persuade Vaidyaji that it was neither necessary nor appropriate to hold fresh elections. But Vaidyaji told him to keep quiet as this was a matter of principle. Even the Principal went on to point out that, so far, there had been no adverse criticism of the college in the newspapers, nor had there been any complaint made to the higher authorities, nor had anyone taken out a protest demonstration, nor gone on a hunger strike. (*Raag Darbari*, 138-139)

Shukla attacks on corruption through the character of Rupan who is the youngest son of Vaidyaji and student leader. He attacks on the corruption prevailed in Police department and says, “If 80 per cent of the people began to confess their crimes, by tomorrow, you’d only have two out of your ten constables left to go on duty. The rest would be in the lock-up” (*Raag Darbari*, 116-117). Vaidyaji also tries to show that he is a follower of principles and he is in the favour of election. He says, “You are right. But this matter is beyond your understanding because it’s a matter of principle. So go on and prepare for the meeting” (*Raag Darbari*, 139). But actually Vaidyaji does not follow principles. He uses unfair means to get victory in the election. He receives help from Balram Singh who frightens the supporters of opposition party (Ramadhin) so that they may not take part in voting. And thus Vaidyaji is elected the manager of the college again. Balram Singh says, “It’s a real foreign piece – a six-shooter – not one of those country pistols which blow up if you fire them once. If this starts firing, six members of Ramadhin’s faction will roll over like hen-sparrows” (*Raag Darbari*, 143). When a pandit with clean kurta-pyjama and cap tries to attend the meeting, Balram Singh threatens him to go back:

Then coming close to the pandit he said, ‘Your presence in the meeting has already been registered. Now go back!’

The pandit attempted to speak, but pushing even closer to him, Balram Singh repeated, ‘I’m saying this with some reason. Go back!’

The pandit felt something hard pressing into his thigh. He glanced down at Balram Singh’s Kurta pocket and took two steps backwards in astonishment. (*Raag Darbari*, 144-145)

After a few days of election a complaint letter regarding malpractice in the election for the post of the manager of Changamal Vidyalaya Intermediate College, Shivpalganj is sent to Education Minister by some members. It was mentioned in the letter that some members were threatened for not attending the meeting and casting their votes. It was also mentioned that there is no law and order in Shivpalganj:

But the Principal was involved in another matter. A few days after the annual general meeting of the college committee, when Vaidyaji had again been unanimously elected manager, some members had sent a letter of complaint about this to the education minister. They claimed that the members who were going to oppose Vaidyaji had been threatened at gunpoint. In the complaint, this incident was described to such an impossible length that, even if you did manage to finish reading the letter, it was impossible to believe what it said, since it inferred that there was no law and order left in Shivpalganj; and things

such as police and police stations did not exist there even in name; and that four hooligans could get together and do exactly as they wanted. (*Raag Darbari*, 158)

But even after this complaint, there is no proper action against the Principal as well as the manager. They use public institutions as their personal property. They misuse their positions of power to manipulate the innocent villagers Francesca Orsini writes, “Institutional spaces are important because they map the presence of the state in the village, while at the same time they reveal how skilled villagers like Viadyaji, Ramadhin, and the Principal use public institutions as their personal property” (*Raag Darbari*, XIV). In the market, when Vaidyaji hears the rumours about the love affair between his eldest son Badri and Bela, the daughter of a Vaishya Gayadin, he loudly says that he is in the favour of inter-caste marriages, “I am not so conservative. Ganghiji was in favour of inter-caste marriages. So am I. Badri’s marriage to Bela will be accepted as a model in every way. But I’ve no idea what Gayadin’s reaction will be. We shall see” (*Raag Darbari*, 263). But when he reaches his house, he scolds Badri and says that he is not in favour of his marriage with Bela, “No Badri, I will not let it pass. Today, I won’t let matters stop here. We are Brahmins, she is a Vaishya. But it’s not just a matter of caste, it’s also a matter of principle! A girl of such morals...” (*Raag Darbari*, 265-266). This incident shows that even a corrupt person like Vaidyaji speaks of principles but he has no principle. Shukla has attacked on the hypocrisy of such persons.

Shukla has also attacked on nepotism. When Vaidyaji is forced by the Government to resign from the post of Managing Director of the cooperative union of Shivpalganj because of the misuse of wheat from its grain store, he resigns and gets his eldest son Badri elected as the new Managing Director of the cooperative union. Vaidyaji shows that he is a religious person and he pretends to be such as person in the market. When he sees a Shiv Lingam, he began to worship. He has no sense of regret that he had won the election by using unfair means. He says:

You are Rudra. You are wrathful. You infuse the whole world with the spirit of destruction. In the village, Ramadhin Bhikhakhervi has lost the election for the post of college manager. He has sent a petition to the deputy director of education saying that the election was won at gunpoint. He has also complained to the district inspector of police. You imbibe bhang and thorn apple. O Snankar! Pour your bhang and thorn apple into the rotten minds of these officials, and make them a little more rotten. Inspire them to write in our favour. O Lord of Ghosts, strike down Ramadhin Bhikhakhervi! (*Raag Darbari*, 259)

The theme of power and how it corrupts people and society is explored in the narrative. It illustrates how the people in positions of authority misuse their influence for personal gain and how the weak suffer at the hands of the strong. The novel reflects rural India’s socio-economic and political realities and how they affect common people’s lives. Shukla exposes the corruption and hypocrisy of the powerful people. Actually Vaidyaji is a corrupt person. He uses all the institutions of the village – the college of the village, the village panchyat, the local government offices for his own political purpose and welfare. He says, “Raising the question of Ram Swarup, the cooperative supervisor, my enemies are speaking of embezzlement in the union. They are screaming that I, too, had a hand in it. The cooperative inspector is a low rascal but honest, and is not raising his hand. Last time, alone with me, he tried to scare me. Strike down that cooperative inspector” (*Raag Darbari*, 260).

To sum up it may be said that *Raag Darbari* is a social and political satire. The narrative is a critique on Indian political and social system and how it impacts rural residents’ lives. It is an attack on corruption and nepotism, politics, Police department, education system, helplessness of intellectuals, opportunism, self-interest

and moral degradation. It exposes the nexus among local politicians, criminals and policemen and highlights how they exploit the common people for their own welfare. Vaidyaji is the most corrupt character in the narrative. He works only for his own welfare. It also criticises the students, teachers and college administration. They do not do their work properly. They are actively involved in unhealthy politics. The men in power exploit the helpless and common people. Such people have no sense of regret that whatever they have done is not just. *Raag Darbari* emphasises the need of change and the common people's contribution to it. The novel shows that despite a corrupt system, people may still change it by their deeds.

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