

REVIEW ESSAY

*The Gift of a Cow:
A Translation of the Classic Hindi Novel Godaan*

by Premchand (Translated by Gordon Roadarmel)
Indiana University Press (2002 [1936]). 437 pp. \$21.95

REVIEWED BY THOMAS JANDL

Critics of orthodox economic development policies are quick to point out the importance of traditional knowledge and practices, arguing that outsider-led development undercuts traditional social and economic structures and makes poor people worse off in the long run. But poverty in the developing world predates colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. What role, then, do tradition and culture play in the process of economic development? Are tradition and culture always positive forces, or can they pose challenges that must be overcome?

Godaan (The Gift of a Cow), a classic novel by the Indian author Premchand, sheds some light on these questions. The story chronicles the failed lifelong quest of a poor peasant to scrape together enough money to buy a cow for his *godaan*—the traditional gift presented to a Brahmin at the time of someone's death. Although *Godaan* was originally published in 1936, readers would be well advised to consider this work in the context of the contemporary debate about culture, tradition, and development. Dripping with more than 400 pages of tearful misery, largely of the characters' own making, the book forces readers to consider how culture often can be an obstacle to social and economic change. As a reflection on development, *Godaan* examines the role of cultural institutions and traditional power structures, showing how caste and religion cause needless suffering and impede economic growth.

The novel's main character, Hori, is willing to endure any hardship or suffer any injustice to maintain standing in his caste. "The village council is the voice of God....Whatever they think fair must be accepted cheerfully," Hori says as he hands over his last bushel of grain

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to pay a fine. Over the course of the story, Hori gives away his food, his oxen, and eventually his house so that he can continue to maintain his standing in the village. His son eventually leaves him, unable to bear the indignity of his low-caste status and his father's inability to stand up for himself. Hori's wife also rebels, but Hori ignores her arguments. To him, there is no life beyond the caste.

In a parallel narrative, the novel depicts the lives of the upper crust of Indian society in the provincial capital Lucknow. Even there, rajas, bankers, and doctors feel constricted by societal roles that force them to follow predetermined paths. In one passage, a wealthy landlord asks his friends, "Do you think I enjoy sucking the blood of half-dead farmers?....But what can I do? Although I despise the system in which I grew up and in which I live, I can't give it up." Soon after, he increases the rent on his land to throw a party.

Godaan challenges conventional assumptions about rational economic decision making. The characters depicted in *Godaan* clearly do not calculate their expected utility. Rather, as political scientists Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor explain, culture provides templates for human behavior, and those who challenge these templates can only succeed if they escape the network of day-to-day structures that enforce this system.¹ Living outside the caste, as Hori knows, means no more loans, no community support, no marriage celebration, no funeral rites, and no one to have a smoke with; at its most severe, it may also mean physical expulsion. In the end, Hori's son Gobar, who leaves the village and the caste, is the only character in *Godaan* to achieve success. The caste system proves so powerful that only an individual who makes an absolute break from the system can gain genuine independence.

The strength of the caste system is its self-enforcing nature. An average Indian peasant cannot rebel against the upper castes because the system reaches down into the most intimate levels of private life and rebellion would cut off all social support systems. This is how this system could last so long and what prevented the lower castes from rebelling against the Brahmins.

Writing in the twilight of British colonialism, Premchand struggles with issues of social change, including the changing relations between men and women. He reveals his personal unease with feminism through the story about a beautiful British-educated female doctor

named Malti who falls in love with the chauvinist philosopher Mehta. Over the course of their relationship, Malti grows increasingly unhappy and is torn between love for Mehta and her modern worldview. Yet in spite of his personal reservations about change in gender roles, Premchand makes it clear through Malti's prominent role in the narrative that India must break with the traditions that hold society back or it will remain dominated by colonizers, landlords, moneylenders, Brahmins, and all those who have oppressed the country.

In *Godaan*, rebels consistently fare better than those who remain passive. Premchand describes two forms of rebellion: the uncompromising version that Hori's son Gobar espouses, and the persistent yet controlled rebellion of Hori's wife, Dhaniya. She rebels against every unjust decision one at a time, but never breaks out of the mold that her culture imposes on her. And while she remains defiant, her misery persists to the bitter end.

Hori, of course, never rebels at all. Even though he has spent his life trying to maintain his dignity and social standing, he dies without the means to feed himself, let alone to obtain his life's dream: a cow for his godaan. Hori is left confused and broken. His cultural template says he is nothing outside the caste, but he never realizes that he is even less within.

Godaan should be required reading for all those charged with designing development programs in communities where traditional cultures still hold sway. On occasion, we may come to the conclusion that the key question is not how traditional culture can be preserved for the sake of a better life of the poor, but how it can best be overcome for the very same purpose. ■

NOTES

¹ Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor. "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms." *Political Studies* 44 (1996): 936-58.