

Raag Darbari: A Dark Portrayal of the Socio-Political and Exquisitely Complex Corruption in Post-Colonial India

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Abstract

In Raag Darbari, Shrilal Shukla delves into the intricate details and intricacies of India, the world's largest democracy, in his novel Raag Darbari. Through this work of creative brilliance, the author employs political satire to vividly portray the pitiful state of the nation, symbolized by the fictional Indian village of Shivpalganj. This village serves as a microcosm of the countless Indian villages that have been disregarded and left behind in terms of modern progress and advancements. In India, politics and government hold immense sway, playing a pivotal role in shaping the destiny of the nation. Gillian Wright, in her introduction to the translated version of Raag Darbari, aptly highlights the significance of 'politics and government' as integral themes within this novel. Consequently, the initial section of this paper explores the evolution of these influential pillars of Indian society by examining the concepts conveyed in the book. The subsequent part provides an insight into the extent of change in India since gaining independence, particularly from socio-political and cultural perspectives, as envisioned by the country's visionary leaders and embraced by ordinary citizens. The aim of this paper is to analyse the satirical techniques employed by Shrilal Shukla in order to expose the realities of post-Independence India. Specifically, the focus is on how the author effectively portrays the true state of villages in India through various situations. Shukla's novel, Raag Darbari, holds a significant place in the genre of satire as it highlights the pervasive corruption that exists at every level of society.

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Introduction

In Raag Darbari, Shrilal Shukla vividly portrays the postcolonial Indian political landscape, which is marred by vested sectarian interests, motives, and corrupt political practices. Through political satire, the novel explicitly showcases the dire state of India by symbolically using a fictional Indian village named Shivpalganj. Politics in India is closely intertwined with socio-cultural and religious institutions, demonstrating that the political realm is not independent. Social institutions wield a significant influence over Indian politics and its leaders. Shrilal Shukla uses his novel as a tool to critique pertinent socio-political issues, urging the nation to demand change. Shivpalganj serves as a representation of Indian villages that are marginalized and disregarded in terms of modern advancements. The majority of Indian villages and their residents still adhere to a 'primitive traditional lifestyle', filled with superstitions, harmful social customs, and dismal economic conditions.

Shrilal Shukla, as a forward-thinking writer, emphasizes the necessity for change to begin at the grassroots level of society. The progression of the nation must stem from the core of its being, which lies in its villages.

In India, the destiny of our nation is determined by the intertwined realms of politics and government. Gillian Wright, in her preface to the translated version of Raag Darbari, emphasizes the significance of these two elements in the novel. Hence, the initial section of this study provides a historical context to these foundational pillars of the narrative. It is my belief that without delving into the historical underpinnings of these institutions, a comprehensive analysis of the post-colonial political landscape in India would be lacking. The British Empire held sway over India for three centuries, leaving an indelible mark on our social, cultural, religious, and economic structures. The concept of 'Politics and Government' is among the notable legacies bequeathed by the British to the Indian populace. Acting as an imperial force,

the British managed to unify the fragmented and diverse Indian subcontinent into a cohesive entity. This monumental task was achieved through the application of 'Western political tactics' and the introduction of Western legal, social, and economic frameworks. As evidenced by Shukla's reference to the police force in the novel, it becomes apparent that the British were instrumental in establishing this institution, only to depart in 1947. This underscores the fact that the policing system in India was a British creation, now serving as the upholders of law and order. Furthermore, the police force not only functions as an extension but also as a representation of the entire judicial apparatus introduced by the British for the smooth operation of their colonial administration. The introduction of English education in India stands out as one of the most enduring contributions made by the British to the Indian society. This educational reform has brought about significant transformations in various spheres, ranging from cultural and social norms to the contemporary political landscape. The British arrival in India marked a significant shift in the way of life for Indians, who were previously entrenched in 'archaic' practices and beliefs. Caste systems and sati were prevalent among Indian villagers, reflecting a society steeped in superstition. However, the introduction of English education brought about a transformation in cultural, social, and religious spheres, propelling India from an 'archaic state' to a 'modern nation'. Shrilal Shukla's depiction of the impact of English education is evident in the Master's question to his student, "How can you learn bloody science without English?" (15). This question underscores the importance of English not only in the realm of science but in all aspects of life for Indians. The pursuit of freedom by our ancestors was fuelled by exposure to western ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity through English education. Drawing inspiration from events like the French revolution and American struggle for independence, Indians developed a nationalist consciousness that culminated in the formation of the nation of 'India'. While the British were once seen as the sole enemy during colonial rule, post-independence India faced internal struggles as Indians grappled with their own challenges. The shift in power from British elites to Indian elites resulted in a change of rulers, but the oppression faced by the servitudes and exploited untouchables remained unchanged. Consequently, a natural conflict arose between the ruling elite Indians and the common people in our country. The novel 'Raag Darbari' vividly portrays this Indian reality through the depiction of Shivpalganj village, where Vaidyaji, the village Pradhan, and other teachers in the colleges represent the Indian elites, while the Chamars and peasants symbolize the common people who suffer under authoritative systems. These power transitions from Western elites to Indian elites have significantly impacted India's political landscape. Following independence, the Congress party's marathon rule for the next two decades played a pivotal role in shaping the country's history. It was during this period that India experienced substantial growth and development under the guidance of visionary leaders. Shrilal Shukla's novel 'Raag Darbari' initially highlights the influence of Gandhi and the Congress on the Indian population, particularly through the character of Rangnath. Sri Lal Shukla illustrates that; "As the great God Vishnu stands head to toe like a pure lotus flower, so Rangnath stood head to toe, a vision of white khadi cotton, the homespun cloth popularized by Mahatma Gandhi. He wore a khadi cap, shirt and pajamas, and over his shoulder hung a bag of the kind used by the Gandhian 'land gift' movement" (2).

The portrayal of Rangnath highlights the significant impact of Gandhi and the Congress ideologies on the Indian population post-independence. Shukla also elaborates on the secular principles of Congress in a separate instance. "Gandhi and Nehru are not the names of caste, but the names of individuals. This is a simple way to rid the country of the caste system. If you take the caste name away from a man and convert it into a surname, then nothing remains of caste. It destroys itself." Shukla highlights Gandhi and Nehru as the faces of Congress, while also emphasizing the party's ideologies through their praise and secular interpretation. Gandhi, known as the father of our nation, and Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, made significant contributions to the country, transcending caste, class, and religious barriers. Nehru, particularly, is credited as the architect of modern India for laying the groundwork for the Five-year plans, which greatly impacted India's material progress. While many view the Five-year plans through an economic lens, Sunil Khilani, in his book 'The Idea of India,' offers a different perspective. "The enduring legacy of the Nehruvian state was not its economic achievements, but in the establishment of a viable structure of a relatively autonomous and democratic nation-state at the core of society, committed to the idea of building a reformist, politically independent, capitalist society. During this period, the state stabilized, and assumed responsibilities, ranging from the abolition of untouchability, establishment of places of higher education and culture, to building dams and nuclear reactors" (38).

Shrilal Shukla's words also reflect the same sentiment, as evident in his novel where he mentions the inscription on a foundation stone of a well in Shivpalganj. The note reads, "Third Five-Year Plan. Village Council Shivpalganj" (202). This inscription on the foundation stone conveys the message that Five-year plans were designed for the advancement of the nation, particularly focusing on the upliftment of the lower strata of society. Additionally, the name of the Shivpalganj village on the foundation stone exemplifies the autonomous rule of the village council in India. It signifies the idea of a self-reliant and independent village council system, which was also implemented by Congress post-independence. In the early sixties, India witnessed significant changes in the agricultural sector, with the Green Revolution of the 1960s making a remarkable impact worldwide by boosting agricultural production. This revolution also had a splendid effect on our country's agricultural output. Our leaders and Five-year plans consistently prioritized the agricultural sector. In the novel, Shukla points out that, "After this, they (political leaders) explained that progress in agriculture was progress for the nation" (56). During this time, Indians began to focus on agricultural production as a means to foster economic development in our nation. As Shukla points out, there was a widespread desire for increased agricultural output, and as a developing country, India relied heavily on the agriculture sector rather than the industrial sector. This is further emphasized by Shukla's reference to a "great politician" in the novel, who only visits once a year. Shukla portrays this politician in the following manner. "He congratulated himself that thanks to the speeches he had made last year the winter crop this year was going to be good. The farmers were cultivating the land according to his instructions. They had realized that land should be ploughed, and not only fertilizer but seeds too should be put into it. They had begun to understand all they were told, and they had lost their apprehensions about new ideas.

The farmers were becoming progressive, and, in short, the only backward thing about them was they were still farmers" (159-60).

The discourse on industrial development and economic progress is prevalent, yet there is a stark contrast in how Indians view agricultural and economic development. Farmers are often labelled as 'uncivilized and downtrodden', despite their crucial role in society. Villages in India remain neglected by both the government and development initiatives. While political leaders and officials give speeches on progress, their actions prioritize personal interests over the welfare of rural communities. An illustrative example from the text highlights the gap between Indian villages and modernity, as Master Motiram introduces a diesel engine to his village, symbolizing the encroachment of modernity in traditional settings. 1. Shukla examines the impact of modernity on Indian villages during the 1960s. An additional illustration of this theme can be seen in the portrayal of Vaidyaji's residence. In this context, Shukla elaborates as "The sort of 'symbolic' modernization exemplified by India's gleaming airports and glittering five star hotels had even affected the architecture of this house" (25-26).

The excerpts vividly illustrate the pursuit of modernization in the late 1950s and 60s, marking a period of significant growth in our country's social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. The interconnected nature of these advancements is evident, as seen in the impact of English education on social issues such as untouchability and sati, which in turn influenced the development of our culture and society. A notable moment in the novel is when Vaidyaji recalls the Prime Minister's address. in that note he says, "Village uplift was only possible on the basis of schools, co-operative committees and village panchayats" (104).

At the outset of this document, I highlighted the significant contributions made by schools, cooperative unions, community centers, and village panchayats in the progress of our nation. Upon India's attainment of independence, our esteemed leaders were confronted with the pressing issue of illiteracy. Undoubtedly, this posed a major obstacle to all facets of development, necessitating the provision of free education to all citizens as the sole means to eliminate this predicament. As Shukla illustrates at the beginning that, "The Changamal Vidyala Intermediate College was founded to 'inspire the youthful citizens of the nation with great ideals and by providing them the best education, to make them the means of the country's uplift" (73).

In the post-colonial Indian context, the government prioritized various factors aside from education, such as community centers, land reform movements, and village panchayats, among others. These initiatives aimed to empower farmers and untouchables residing in villages. Community centers were introduced to promote the well-being of villagers, as Indian villages often lacked access to modern developments like hygiene, healthcare, and disease prevention due to traditional beliefs. The establishment of community centers provided a much-needed solution to address these issues nationwide. The land reform movement also played a crucial role in post-colonial India, serving as a response to the exploitation of poor farmers by feudal landlords. Shrilal Shukla's RaagDarbari highlights the significance of land reform movements in India, citing Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Movement as an example.

In his work, Shukla effectively portrays the complete democratic process through the inhabitants of Shivpalganj. Figures such as Prdhan, Vidyaji, and Sanichar exemplify the

notion of democracy, despite harboring their own intentions and interests. As Gayadin tells Mata Prashad, "Brother Mata Prashad, you lack the qualities of a leader. A leader must be familiar with every aspect of his people's lives, while the people should know nothing about the leader." (313).

The decline of the Indian National Congress in the late 1960s marks the start of the second phase of Indian politics. During this period, the nation experienced a surge of tensions and conflicts. Instead of prioritizing the welfare of the people they represented, our leaders became fixated on monetary gain, driven by the material advancements and steady growth in the agricultural sector. Consequently, these leaders embraced sectarian politics, forsaking their responsibility to serve the populace at large in favour of catering solely to their caste and class. Within the novel, Rmadhin Bhikhmakheris exemplifies this brand of politics, as Shrilal Shukla illustrates, "Later on, when he fell victim to factional politics, not for any particular reason, but just due to the influence of village or rather, national, culture..."(42).

Thus, this form of politics, rooted in caste, class, and religion, further complicated the post-colonial Indian landscape. Politicians began accumulating wealth by exploiting their power and distributing meager sums to villagers solely to secure votes. Incensed by this injustice, ordinary citizens resorted to militant tactics to combat the sectarian leaders and their corrupt practices. The working class, peasants, and untouchables of our nation united to form militant peasant and people's movements in defiance of this dirty politics. It is for this reason that the Sub Inspector states in the novel, "Bribery, theft, dacoit- now they've all become the same. Its communism" (10).

The Inspector discusses the Naxalbari system, which emerged in response to sectarian politics in India. Initially, people associated the Naxalbari movement with Communism due to its nature and ideologies. This movement marked the first people's reaction against sectarian politics. Despite the hope that the new Indian constitution would ensure equal rights and justice for all, the post-colonial judiciary failed to deliver on this promise. The common people and peasants felt alienated from the mainstream judicial system (Hoddy 98). Principal, in the novel, highlights the existence of high courts and the Supreme Court for different classes, criticizing the judicial system's failure to provide equal justice. Shrilal Shukla's words reveal that the judiciary in India is influenced by the politically powerful and wealthy. Chote's statement to the Magistrate reflects the harsh reality faced by common people in the judicial system. Additionally, the government and bureaucracy in India are depicted as complex entities in the novel, with bribery being a common practice among bureaucrats. Corruption is observed as a natural occurrence among politicians and bureaucrats, as illustrated in Langar's description of the clerk in the Tehsil office.

In the same section, Shrilal Shukla illustrates the fate of an application submitted to a government office. Any minor error, such as insufficient stamps, an incorrect file number, or an incomplete column, results in the application being displayed on the notice board. Failure to rectify these mistakes by the specified deadline leads to rejection (34-35). Langar's encounter is not unique; in India, it is common for individuals to repeatedly visit government offices in order to receive any form of assistance from clerks and civil servants. Due to widespread illiteracy, people refrain from speaking out against such injustices. The initial enthusiasm displayed by government officials towards education has dwindled over time. Ironically, literate individuals face more hardships than

the illiterate ones, as they tend to become self-centered and indifferent to societal issues. Shukla points out that educated individuals in India often suffer from a 'crisis of conscience', particularly those who perceive themselves as intellectuals (147).

As India embarked on its journey towards steady growth as an independent nation, the welfare of the common people seemed to fade away from the minds of our politicians and bureaucrats. This unfortunate reality extended to the realm of education reforms as well. Even in present-day India, the remnants of the caste system continue to haunt us. A vivid example of this can be found in a novel, where a village called 'Chamrahi' is described as the dwelling place of the untouchables. The term 'Chamar' refers to a caste that has long been considered untouchable. Prior to the implementation of the constitution, untouchables were shunned and avoided by others. This depiction of the segregated village of Chamrahi highlights the exclusion of untouchables from mainstream society. Although our constitution guarantees equality, justice, and rights for all citizens, the reality is that this 'equality' remains confined to the pages of the constitution, a mere relic of the past. India's history has been marred by divisions based on caste, creed, class, and religion, among others. Consequently, sectarian politics continues to shape the destiny and image of leaders even in modern India. Where there is division, the risk of violence looms large, as evidenced by the history of communal riots in our country. Each day, the nation wakes up to new stories of scams and communal tensions, which are the lingering effects of the colonial 'divide and rule' policy.

Ultimately, I maintain that in order to protect our nation and heritage from the various societal vices mentioned, we must engage in 'negotiation' with those different from us, just as the character Vaidyaji does in the novel. By demonstrating a willingness to negotiate and embracing others, regardless of their caste, creed, class, or religion, we can safeguard our democracy and continue to uphold its esteemed legacy.

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