

RaagDarbari: An Analysis of the Post-Colonial Political Scenario in India

Alex K. O 

Assistant Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India.

Received: 14-02-2023 Revised: 22-04-2023 Accepted: 25-04-2023

Abstract

In the novel, *RaagDrabari*, Shrilal Shukla explores the little nuances and complexities of the largest democracy in the world, India. This creative work as a political satire explicitly presents the pathetic condition of India by metaphorically presenting a typical Indian village called Shivpalganj. It is a microcosm of Indian villages which are alienated and neglected in terms of modern material outlooks and developments. In India, politics and government are the two important factors that decide the fate of the country. As Gillian Wright points out in her introduction to the translated version of *RaagDarbari*, 'politics and government' are the two integral aspects of this novel. Therefore, the first part of this paper traces the evolution of these two strong pillars of India by focusing on the ideas presented in the novel. And the remaining part elucidates how much India changed since independence in terms of the socio-political and cultural perspectives envisioned by the visionary leaders and shared by common men.

Keywords

Post-colonialism, Governance, Democracy, Development

RaagDarbari: An Analysis of the Post-Colonial Political Scenario in India

Alex K. O

In the novel *RaagDarbari*, Shrilal Shukla illustrates the picture of the post-colonial Indian political scenario which is muddled by vested sectarian interests, motives, and evil political practices. The novel as a political satire explicitly presents the pathetic condition of India by metaphorically presenting a typical Indian village called Shivpalganj. In India, the political domain is not an independent one because the arena of politics is closely associated with certain socio-cultural and religious, institutions. To a certain extent, the fate of Indian politics and political leaders is deeply influenced by the magical hands of these social institutions. By using this novel as a weapon, Shrilal Shukla criticizes relevant socio-political issues and he summons the nation to raise its voice for a change. The picture of Shivpalganj is a microcosm of Indian villages which are alienated and neglected in terms of modern material outlooks and developments (Anjaria 4798). In a nation where people ranging from school child to well-known political leader daily uses charming words like development, modernity, justice, equality, etc. to point out the index of the progress of our nation. But, the sad reality is that the majority of the Indian villages and people still follow a 'primitive traditional lifestyle' which is full of supernatural beliefs, evil social practices, and pathetic economic conditions. As a visionary writer Shrilal Shukla, declares the truth that change has to be made from the bottom of society. Progress must be built upon the soul of this nation and that is, 'villages'.

In India, politics and government are the two integral aspects that decide the fate of our country. As Gillian Wright states in her introduction to the translated version of *RaagDarbari* 'Politics and Government' are the two integral aspects of this novel. Therefore, the first part of this paper gives a historical background to these two important foundations of this novel. Because without the historical reference to these institutions, I believe the analysis of the post-colonial political scenario in India will not be complete. India was ruled over Three centuries by the British and they have made tremendous changes and contributions to our social, cultural, religious, and economic institutions. The idea of 'Politics and Government is one of the significant contributions made by the British to the Indians. As an imperial power, the British ruled the fragmented and diverse India as a unified integral country. British made this herculean task possible only through their own 'Western political tactics', and also by introducing Western legal, social, and economic institutions. That is why Shukla writes about the Police in the novel, "The British installed them, and in 1947 returned to their homeland" (Shukla 9). This line indicates the truth that the police in the Indian legal domain were created by the British and now the same system is being followed and the police act as the safeguards of law and order. Along with this, here the police is not just an extension but a representation of the whole judicial system which was implemented in India by the British for their own

pleasant colonial rule. English education in India is one of the most prominent contributions which were made by the British to the Indians. This English education made a lot of great changes in our country which can range from the different cultural and social aspects to the present political systems. Before the arrival of the British, Indians were leading an 'archaic' kind of life that was full of supernatural beliefs; evil practices like caste and sati were common among the Indian villagers. With the advent of English education in India, our cultural, social, and religious domains began to reflect sudden changes and progress along with the change from an 'archaic state' to a 'modern nation'. Shrilal Shukla clearly portrays the influence of English education in India by making the Master ask a question to his student. There the Master asks his student, "How can you learn bloody science without English?" (15).

This question is not just applicable not only to science but also to every Indian to reflect upon the importance of English in all spheres of life. Our ancestors began to fight for freedom when they realized the value of western principles of liberty, equality and fraternity through English education. They read about the French revolution and American struggle for independence and they got inspiration from all these epic freedom fights in history which later helped our ancestors to form a nationalist consciousness, the ultimate result of this kind of consciousness resulted in the formation of a nation called 'India'. During the colonial period, the British were the only enemy of the whole country but after independence, the Indians began to fight against themselves. Only the rulers changed from British elites to Indian elites but the servitudes and exploited untouchables under both these regimes remained the same. So, the fight between the ruling elite Indians and the common people in our country become a natural phenomenon. Shivpalganj village in this novel gives a clear picture of this kind of an Indian situation where Vaidyaji, village Pradhan and other teachers in the colleges are the representatives of Indian elites, and the Chamars and the peasants in the village are the people who represent the common people in India who have to suffer under all authoritative systems.

These transformations of power from the Western elites to the Indian elites have made a lot of changes in the political arenas of India, especially, soon after the independence, our country witnessed the marathon rule of the Congress party for the next two decades. These two decades have had a significant role in history. This was the period when India began its real growth and development through the visions and deeds of great visionary leaders. In the beginning part of the novel '*RaagDarbari*', Shrilal Shukla illustrates the influence of Gandhi and Congress on the Indians, soon after the Independence through the description of Rangnath. Shukla describes 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). This description of Rangnath shows how much the influence of Gandhi and the ideologies of Congress over the people in India after the independence. On another occasion to describe the secular ideology of Congress Shukla writes; "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."

Here, Shukla uses Gandhi and Nehru only as the leaders who represented Congress but he advocates the ideologies of the party by praising them and giving this kind of secular interpretation to their names. Gandhi as the father of our nation and Nehru as the first Prime Minister of India made a lot of contributions to our nation irrespective of all caste, class, and religious discriminations. Especially, Nehru as the

architect of modern India laid the foundation stone for Five-year plans, which played a vital role in the material progress of India. On the surface level, people always give an 'economic' interpretation to the Five-year plans. But in his book 'The Idea of India,' Sunil Khilani observes that "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).

The reflection of this statement is also very much visible in Shrilal Shukla's words too because, in the novel, he writes about the inscription on a foundation stone of a well that was built in Shivpalganj. There, a note goes like this, "Third Five-Year Plan. Village Council Shivpalganj" (202). This inscription on the foundation stone also gives the message that Five-year plans were made for the progress of the nation. And this development has to be from the lower strata of society. Another important thing is that the name of the Shivpalganj village on the foundation stone is the best example of the autonomous rule of the village council in India. The name of the village council on the foundation stone displays the idea of an autonomous and self-reliant village council system, which was also implemented by Congress after independence. In India, the early sixties witnessed a lot of changes in the agricultural sector; the Green revolution of the 1960s made its grand arrival all over the world by increasing all agricultural production. The splendid effect of this revolution was also visible in the agricultural production of our country. And our leaders and Five-year plans always gave the first preference to 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). So, this was the period when Indians started to look up to agricultural production to create material growth in our country. Because, as Shukla observes everyone was pleading for an increase in agricultural production and as a developing nation India always trusted the agriculture sector more than the industrial sector. That is what Shukla explains again when he talks about the 'great politician' in the novel who gives a visit once a year. He describes that politician like this, "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).

On one side everyone talks about industrial development and economic progress but on the other side, Indians who need agricultural and economic development will seal the farmers as 'uncivilized and downtrodden'. Normally the villages in India are untouched and alienated by both the government and developments. Political leaders and government officials will deliver non-stop speeches on villages and progress but when the matter of development comes to a more practical level then all these men prioritize their vested interests and selfish motives. A classic example from the text to show the distance between Indian villages and modernity is that when Master asks his students, "Who was it who brought a diesel engine into this village? Does anybody know?" Then a boy answers "You! You brought it." (17). This is the best example that shows the invasion of modernity into Indian villages. Master Motiram as an Indian is the one who spreads out the idea of modernity through his flour mill diesel engine. Here, Shrilal

Shukla traces the invasion of modernity into the Indian villages along with the developments in the 1960s. Another example that can be related to this idea of modernity is the description of Vaidyaji's house. There, Shukla explains that "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).

These are prime examples from the novel which clearly explain the late 1950s and 60s quest for modernization and these were the periods when our country's social, economic, political, and cultural domain started to get a steady growth. All these material developments are connected to each other. For instance, through English education, we Indians realized the truth that social evils like untouchability and sati decreased the acceleration of the development of our culture and society. In the novel, there is a part where Vaidyaji remembers the Prime Minister's speech, in that speech he says, "Village uplift was only possible on the basis of schools, co-operative committees and village panchayats" (104).

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, schools, cooperative unions, community centers, and village panchayats played an important role in the development of our nation. When India became an independent nation the first problem that was faced by our great leaders were illiteracy. Here, it was a major hurdle to all forms of development and the only way to eradicate this problem was to provide free education to all in our country. It is because of this Shukla explains at the beginning of the Tenth chapter 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 scenario other than education the government gave much preference to certain other factors like community centers, land reform movements, and village panchayats, etc. All these implementations were made to emancipate the farmers and the untouchables in the villages. The idea of community centers was introduced in India to secure the health of the villagers (Kumar 438). As I mentioned earlier, normally Indian villages are very much alienated from the so-called 'development' and due to the lack of this progressive mentality, they were not aware of hygiene, health care, and epidemics. The villagers always equated these issues with supernatural beliefs. So, in this kind of 'archaic' world, the idea of community centers was a great relief to the villagers all over the nation. The land reform movement was another significant change in the post-colonial Indian government. This movement in the country started as a reaction against the feudal landlords in India who were trying to dominate and exploit the poor farmers. For instance, in *RaagDarbari*, Shrilal Shukla clearly explains the importance of land reform movements in India, by referring to Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Movement.

Both these names suggest the influence and impact of the land reforms of the early 1950s and 60s on society. The division of power is one of the most prominent features of Indian democracy. In India, the village council or village panchayats is the best example that stands for the division of power. In this work, Shukla clearly illustrates the whole process of democracy through the villagers of Shivpalganj, their Pradhan, Vidyaji, Sanichar are the best examples who reflect the idea of democracy even though they have their intentions and interests behind everything. As Gayadin says to Mata Prashad that, "Brother Mata Prashad you don't have the qualities of a leader. A leader needs to know every vein in his people's body, but the people shouldn't know anything about the leader." (313)

The second phase of Indian politics began with the fall of Congress in India in the late 1960s(Yadav 98). This was the period that witnessed a lot of tensions and conflicts all over the country. The material progress and steady growth of agricultural sectors made our leaders dream only about money not about the people whom they represented. And these leaders become the proponents of sectarian politics. Most of the leaders who are supposed to serve the people began to serve their caste and class of people. In this novel, Rmadhin Bhikmakheris the best example of a leader who follows this sectarian politics. Because Shrilal Shukla presents him in this way; “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). This kind of politics which is based on caste, class, and religion made the situation in post-colonial India more complex. And the politicians began to make more money by using the power and from that huge amount they began to give a little portion of that money to the villagers just for the vote. Common people began to fight against this kind of injustice through certain militant ways. The working-class men, peasants, and untouchables of our country began to form militant peasant and people’s movements against sectarian leaders and their dirty politics. That is why in the novel, Sub Inspector says, “Bribery, theft, dacoit- now they’ve all become the same. Its communism” (10).

Here, the Inspector is talking about the Naxalbari system which was spreading as a reaction against the sectarian politics in India. And in the initial stages of the Naxalbari movement, people began to associate it with Communism because of its nature and ideologies. So, the Naxalbari movements were the first reaction from the people against sectarian politics. When the constitution of India was formed, people thought that the new constitution would provide equal rights and justice to all irrespective of caste, race, and class. But the post-colonial Indian judiciary failed to promise what the constitution upholds as ‘right’. The common people and the peasants were very much alienated from the mainstream judicial system(Hoddy 98). That is what Principal elaborates in the novel, “For even bigger people there are big high courts, and for the highest class of all the Supreme Court. If anyone can admonishing glance at them they go straight to Delhi to file a writ petition” (146). Through the words of Principal, Shrilal Shukla criticize the judicial system in India which stands for the idea of equal justice to all but in reality, it provides only injustice. Hence, these statements reveal the truth that the judiciary in India is very much influenced by politically powerful and rich individuals. For the common people, the situation is very hard and that is why Chote says to the Magistrate that “ When you set foot in a court you already have one leg in jail and one out of it”.(226). These words reflect the condition of the modern complex judicial system in the country. Along with this, government and bureaucracy also share an equal stature of complexity in terms of their functions. In the novel, Shrilal Shukla explains bribery as a common phenomenon among the bureaucrats in India. And he observes corruption as a natural practice among both politicians and bureaucrats. The real situation of a government office is very much visible in Langar’s words when he talks about the clerk in the Tehsil office. There he says, “So, now it’s come to this. He squanders his salary on liquor and meat curry and takes bribes to get his daughters marries” (34).

Again, in the same part, Shrilal Shukla describes what happens to an application that one submits to a government office. “An application can be rejected at any time. Too few stamps, the file number incorrect, one column incomplete- any mistake like that is posted on the notice board and if it’s not corrected by the prescribed date the application is rejected” (34-35). Langar’s experience is not an odd one; in India, among the clerks and other civil servants, it is a custom to knock on the office doors several times to get any kind of service or help from those officials. No one wants to raise their voice against

these kinds of injustice because the majority of the people are still illiterate. The initial enthusiasm that our governments and other officials have shown in the matter of education has been lost over time. The cases of literate individuals were more miserable than the illiterate ones. Because the literate individuals began to become more selfish and just began to find solace in their own limited surroundings. They didn't raise any voices or made any agitations against these kinds of problems. That is why Shukla explains that "Educated people in India occasionally afflicted with a certain disease which is known as 'crisis of conscience'. Among the educated people, this disease generally attacks those who consider themselves intellectuals" (147).

When India as an independent nation gained momentum of steady growth our politicians and bureaucrats began to forget the common people and their welfare and that is what happened in the case of education reforms too. Even in modern India, we are haunted by the scars of the caste system. For example, in the novel, there is a description of the untouchable's village side called '*Chamrahi*'. "*Chamar*" is the name of a caste that is considered untouchable. An untouchable is a kind of biped which, before the enforcement of the constitution, people didn't use to touch" (102). This description of the village part called '*Chamrahi*' where the *Chamars* live shows the segregation of untouchables from the mainstream public spheres. Our constitution guarantees equality; justice and rights to all citizens, but in reality, that 'equality' is just an old-fashioned word confined only to the pages of the constitution. The history of India is built upon the lines of these types of segregation based on caste, creed, class, and religion, etc. That is why sectarian politics play a vital role in defining the fate and face of leaders even in modern India. When there is division then the chance of violence is at its peak and that is what we have been witnessing in terms of the history of communal riots in the country. Every day, the nation wakes up with a new scams story and communal tension story which is an aftereffect of the colonial 'divide and rule policy'.

Finally, I would argue that the only way to save our country and culture from all those social evils is to 'negotiate' with the other, like the Vaidyaji in the novel, who in the end gets ready to negotiate with the other and he tries to embrace the other. So, the only way to save our democracy is to embrace the other irrespective of caste, creed, class, and religion and that will help us to carry forward the legacy as the greatest democratic.

Works Cited

- Yadav, Yogendra. "Reconfiguration in Indian politics: State assembly elections, 1993-95." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1996, pp. 95- 104. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4403675>
- Shukal, Shrilal. *RaagDarbari*. Trans. Wright Gillian. Delhi. Penguin Books Limited, 2003. Print.
- Hoddy, Eric T. "Peasants' rights and agrarian violence in transitional settings: From transitional justice to transformative agrarian justice." *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2021, pp. 91-109. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2020.1850242>
- Hasan Zoya, ed. *Politics and the State in India*. Delhi. Sage Publications, 2008. Print
- Khilani Sunil. *The Idea of India*. London. Hamish Hamilton. 1997
- Anjaria, Ulka. "Satire, Literary Realism and the Indian State: Six Acres and a Third and Raag Darbari." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 46, 2006, pp. 4795-480. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/4418923>
- Kumar, Ashutosh. "Politics and government in the "Hindi heartland" India: reading Raag Darbari." *India Review*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2021, pp. 436-450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2021.1958584>

The Author:

Alex K. O

Assistant Professor, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, India.

Email: alexouseppachan@gmail.com