

The Bond of Slavery

*Sawā Ser Gehun*¹ by Premchand in Hindi

Translated into English by UMESH KUMAR

1

Once upon a time, a *Kurmi*² farmer named Shankar lived in a nondescript village. Like most farmers, he too received the inheritance of poverty from his ancestors. And as usually happens, his poverty was complimented by his simplicity. A man of few words, confronting others was not in Shankar's nature. He himself was neither an aggressor nor a taker of sides. The usual earthly wisdom of treachery, trickery and loot were still unknown to him. He seldom got two square meals a day. But even that did not bother him for he would take resort to *Chbena*³ during such times. In the absence of Chbena, he would drink enough water, recite the name of God and retire to bed. However, Shankar had to surrender this repose and self-contentment during the arrival of guests at his door. The arrival of holy guests such as the *sadhu-mahatmas*⁴ and ascetics, especially, as a matter of fact, would compel him to behave according to the established 'ways' of the world. He himself

¹ Sawa Ser Gehun (One and a Quarter *Ser* of Wheat) was first published in Urdu as 'Sawa Ser Gehun' in *Chand* (Issue: November, 1924), and later included in *Firdaus-e Khayaal*, (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1924). The contemporary Urdu availability can also be cited in *Kulliyat-e Premchand*, Vol. 11 (Delhi: National Council for Promotion of Urdu Language, 2001). It is also available in Hindi through Mansarovar, Vol. 4 (Benares: Saraswati Press, 1939). For the source text used in the present translation see, Bhism Sahani (ed.), *Premchand: Pratinidhi Kahaniyaan*, (Delhi: Rajkamal Paperbacks, 2008), pp. 55-61.

² Collective name for the Hindu agricultural caste(s).

³ A multigrain dish chiefly dominated by the gram and the flattened rice.

⁴ Sages and ascetics, more in the sense of those who have not succumbed to the earthly frailties.

could have slept hungry, but could never imagine seeing the holy sage starving. After all, he was a devotee of god!

One fine evening, a Mahatma appeared at his door. Matted hairs adorned his radiant face, *pitambar*⁵ in the neck; he was carrying a brass *kamandal*⁶. Wooden slippers comforted his feet and he spotted a pair of glasses on his face. By his very look, it was not difficult to determine that such Mahatmas often frequented the houses of nobles to perform penance, used aircraft to visit the religious places and always preferred delicious food so as to achieve the highest degree of excellence in *yogic*⁷ practices. Shankar was pushed into a dilemma thinking of the Mahatma's possible food habits. He only had the flour of *Jau*⁸ at home. How could he compel the Mahatma to eat *Jau*? Whatever had been its status in the earlier times but according to the contemporary knowledge, the food processed from *Jau* is considered indigestive, especially for the noble souls like that of the Mahatma. Shankar really felt troubled. What should be offered to the Mahatma? At last, he decided to borrow the wheat flour from someone. However, he could not get it in the entire village. After all, all in the village were humans, none of them was God; there was no chance of getting the godly food. Fortunately, he found some wheat in the house of the village priest, a brahman turned moneylender.

⁵ Literally yellow, it also has an association with the popular Hindi Gods such as Krishna and Vishnu.

⁶ A water storage pot usually seen in the hands of Hindu ascetics. It is usually made of wood and metal.

⁷ Collective name for the group of exercises that enhance the physical, mental and spiritual domains of the human body. It is supposed to have its origin in ancient India.

⁸ Barley. In conversation with his father, the translator came to know that in the times when Premchand was writing, *Jau* was called the 'poor man's wheat'!

He borrowed a quarter *ser*⁹ of wheat from him and requested his wife to grind it. The Mahatma ate to his heart's content and had a sound sleep. Next morning, he showered his blessings on Shankar and was on his way.

The brahman moneylender used to get his share from *khalihani*¹⁰ twice a year. Shankar thought to himself: What is the point in returning that quarter ser of wheat? Along with his usual share of *punseri*,¹¹ I shall add a little more. *He will understand it. I will understand it.* During the *chaitra*¹² month, while distributing *khalihani*, Shankar gave one and half *punseri* of wheat to the brahman. Thinking himself now to be free from the existing debt, Shankar did not even mention it. The brahman also did not ask again. Not at least at that time. It was, however, unknown to poor Shankar that he had to take another birth— to free him from the debt of that quarter ser of wheat! The debt never got off his head.

2

Seven years passed. From a priest, the brahman became a moneylender. Meanwhile, from a peasant, Shankar became a daily wage labourer. His younger brother Mangal too got separated from him. When they were together, they were peasants. Separation made them daily wage seekers. Shankar tried much to control the fire of distrust and hatred between him and Mangal but every time the situation got the better of him. The day his home was divided into two kitchens, Shankar

⁹ In the contemporary mathematical understanding it would be 933.10 grams.

¹⁰ Refers to the claiming of agricultural produce for the 'services' rendered to the farmer by the people of different castes. It was done in lieu of money.

¹¹ Around 5 kilograms. During discussion it emerged that there is another word called *pasheri* which is used as a synonym of *punseri*.

¹² Month of Hindu calendar referring to the March -April months of English calendar.

wept like a lost child. From now onwards, the brothers will become enemies. If one would cry, the other would laugh; if there would be mourning in one's house, the other would erupt in celebration; the ties of blood, of love, of milk –all being eradicated now. Shankar had nurtured this tree of family honour through his life and blood. His heart trembled to see it being uprooted like this. He could not eat anything for a week. After working under the scorching *Jeth*¹³ sun throughout the day, he would cover his face and would go to sleep. This emotional and mental calamity sucked his blood and converted him into a life comparable to death. Once fallen ill, he could not get back to his health for months. How would he survive now? Out of the five *bighas*, only half remained along with a bullock on his side. How was it possible to be a peasant now? At last, cultivation became a mere instrument of preserving the family honour for Shankar for livelihood rested now entirely on the daily wage earning.

One day when Shankar was returning from the day's labour, the brahman stopped him and said, 'Shankar, come tomorrow to settle your accounts of loan and interest. You owe me around thirty-eight kilograms of wheat for a long time and you show no signs of returning that! Do you want to digest all that?

Shankar was really surprised. He reverted –'When did I take wheat from you? Where is the point of them turning to the tune of thirty-eight kilograms? You are mistaken. I owe neither a fistful of grain nor a single paisa to anyone!'

Brahman –Such intentions! No wonder you are paying for it in this very life. Because of this nature of yours, you never have enough to eat.

And from thereon, the brahman narrated the episode of quarter ser of wheat that Shankar borrowed from him seven years ago.

¹³ Hindu months referring to May-June of English calendar.

It was like an electric shock to Shankar. He thought to himself –Oh Gods! How many times have I given him *khalihani* and what did he do for me in return? In the past, whenever he came for rituals and during religious hours or to show almanac, I always gave him some *dakshina*¹⁴. Such greed and selfishness! Was he sitting on this quarter ser of wheat all this while so as to make a mountain out of a molehill? From that small borrowing, he has created this monster which will surely gobble me. These many days, he never uttered a single line. I could have returned his wheat easily if he could have said so. Why was he so deliberate in his silence – to trap me? Finally, Shankar said, *maharaj*¹⁵ –it is true that I never returned your grains by a making a specific mention of them. But on numerous occasions, I did give more than a quarter ser of wheat and sometimes twice during the *khalihani*. Today you are demanding five and half a *mun*¹⁶, from where I would give all this?

Brahman – only the ledger speaks the truth and not the rewards that you may have bestowed upon me. The rewards given to me don't count even if they are four times of your existing debt. The accounts book says that five and a half *mun* is written against your name. If you repay –I shall strike off your name, else it will keep on increasing.

Shankar – *Pandey*¹⁷, why do you trouble a poor man like me? I am a hand to mouth person, from where would I bring such a quantity of wheat?

Brahman – I don't care from where you bring but I am not going to spare you even for a single grain. If you won't pay here, you shall pay it hereafter –in front of the God.

¹⁴ Alms, here in the sense of compensation.

¹⁵ Literally king, used here as a term of respect for the superior caste.

¹⁶ Forty kilograms.

¹⁷ Here used as a surname for the Brahman.

Shankar shuddered with horror. If we educated would have been there at Shankar's place, we could have said –good deal! We shall pay you at the God's house; his measurements won't be bigger than yours. Further, where is the proof that God presides over such transactions? Why worry then! Unfortunately, Shankar was not that logical and tactful. He was bereft of such diplomacies. At the first place, it is a debt – and that too of a brahman –if my name remains in the ledger! I shall directly find myself in the hell –the very thought of all this made Shankar highly uncomfortable. He said – maharaj whatever I owe you, I shall pay you in this life only. Why should I drag it to the God's house? I have been struggling in this life, why to plant thorns for the next one? However, this is no justice. You have made a mountain out of a hill. As a brahman, you should not have done this to me. You ought to have asked your money at that very moment itself. You refrained so as to put this mountain of debt on my head. I shall pay but you have to answer in God's court for this injustice meted out to me.

Brahman – You may be afraid of that court but not me. Besides, all those who operate there are my own kinsmen. The sages and seers are all brahmans there and so are the Gods. And you don't bother about the plus and minuses of my life, I shall manage it myself. So, when are you paying your debt?

Shankar – I do not have anything as of now. I must borrow from someone to pay you!

Brahman- your excuses will not work anymore. It's been seven years now. I will not wait for a single day now. If you cannot return the wheat, sign a bond with me.

Shankar – I have to pay. How does it matter if you take the wheat or ask me to sign a bond? By the way, what will you charge for the wheat?

The market rate is that of five *ser*s but for you, I will charge at the rate of five and a quarter *ser*.

Shankar – When I am paying, I will do so on the market rate. Why should I be blamed for taking the exemption of a mere quarter?

On calculation, it was found that the wheat was worth rupees sixty. Consequently, a bond was drawn for sixty rupees at the interest rate of three percent. In the case of non-payment, the consequent year will charge the interest rate at three and a half percent. On the top of it, Shankar was asked to pay eight *annas*¹⁸ for the stamp paper and another rupee for drawing the document.

Almost everyone in the village denounced the brahman, but not on his face. Everyone had to cross the path of the brahman-moneylender; nobody could have dared to offend him!

3

For almost a year, Shankar worked extremely hard. He almost vowed to himself to pay his debt before the due date. The home had no cooking before the afternoons. The *chabena* would be the only source of survival till midday. Slowly, that too stopped. The leftover roties of the night will be kept only for his son! The only addiction that Shankar had was that of tobacco. His tobacco expenditure was worth a paisa every day. He decided to relinquish his addiction for the sake of his resolve. He threw away the *cheelum*¹⁹, broke his *hukka*²⁰ and smashed the tobacco pot. He had to give up his clothes even earlier. Now their presence had shrunk only to the extent of covering his nakedness. He spent the entire bone-chilling

¹⁸ An Anna was equal to 1/16 of a Rupee. Shankar, in this way, paid 50 paise for the stamp paper.

¹⁹ Clay pipe for smoking.

²⁰ Smoking pipe.

winter by sitting near the fire. The result of this herculean effort was beyond his apprehension. By the end of the year, he could save sixty rupees. He decided to give those sixty rupees to the brahman and thought to say – maharaj, I will pay the remaining money very soon. It is just a matter of fifteen rupees. Panditjee will surely agree. Won't he! He took the money and presented at the brahman's feet. Panditjee, surprised, asked Shankar – have you borrowed it from someone?

Shankar – No maharaj, with your blessing I got good wages this time.

Brahman – but these are only sixty rupees!

Shankar – yes maharaj, please take them as of now. Rest of the money I will pay in two-three months, please free me from my debt now.

Brahman- you shall only be freed the day you don't owe a single penny to me. Go and bring my fifteen rupees.

Shankar – maharaj have mercy on me; it has now become difficult for me to arrange even one meal a day. I am not running away from the village. Someday, I will pay your remaining money too.

Brahman – Such excuses will not appease me. Neither I wish to engage in unnecessary dialogues. If you don't pay the entire money –from today onwards, an interest rate of three percent will be charged. You can either take this money of yours or leave it with me. It's up to you.

Shankar –All right. Please keep whatever I have brought. I must go and manage fifteen rupees from some sources.

Shankar roamed the whole village but no one gave him the money. It was not because villagers did not trust him or there

was no money with them. It was because no one had the guts to meddle with the brahman's prey.

4

It is a natural rule that for every action there is a reaction. Despite working extremely hard for a year to wave off his debt, Shankar could not succeed. The failure brought about a certain helplessness and despair in him. He understood that even after so much hard work, he could not muster more than sixty rupees in a year. In such a situation, where was the chance to collect the double amount?

When he was destined to suffer from the burden of debt, it does not now matter to him whether it was small or big. He completely lost the will of his life and began to hate the idea of hard work. Usually, it's the hope that keeps one's spirits alive. Hope has fervour, it has force and life lives in hope. Actually, hope is the driving force of the world. After losing hope, Shankar plunged into despair. The desires that he had kept at bay for almost a year now started to knock at his door –not as beggars but like the albatross on his back, unwilling to leave him without getting pacified. After all, there is a limit to which one can torture oneself. Shankar abandoned the idea of saving money. Now, whenever the money came to him, he would spend it on clothes and food. Earlier, he only had the habit of tobacco but now got addicted to others stimulants like *charas-ganja*²¹. Now, he was hardly bothered about his impending debts. He would pretend as if there was no burden on him. Earlier, skipping of work was unknown to him but now looked for excuses not to work.

Meanwhile, three years passed. During this period the brahman never asked him about the money. He was a clever hunter and

²¹ The powerful narcotic preparation for smoking extracted from the cannabis plant.

knew when to hit the nail on its head. To provide even slight hint to the prey regarding what is coming was against his hunting wisdom.

One day, punditjee called Shankar to show him the accounts. Even after subtracting the sixty rupees deposited by Shankar earlier, he still owed one hundred and twenty rupees to the brahman.

Shankar – I shall pay this money in the next life, it won't be possible in this birth.

Brahman – I will recover it in this life only. If not the principal, you must pay the interest.

Shankar – What I have apart from a Bullock, you take that.

Brahman – What I will do with Bullocks and Cows. You still have so much to offer.

Shankar – Maharaj, what else I have?

Brahman – you are still alive. You must be working as a labourer at some place and I too need one for my fields. For the sake of paying interest, you must work on my fields from now onwards. And pay the principal when it is convenient for you. In reality, you cannot work anywhere till you pay my debts. You have no ancestral property so I have no excuse to let you go. Who would take the pain to see if you are paying the debts every month or not? By working in other places, you are not even able to pay the interest. In such a scenario, what assurance I have about the principal?

Shankar – Maharaj, if I will work on your fields in lieu of the interest, what shall I eat?

Brahman – Your wife and children are there. Are they going to sit idle? As far as I am concerned, I will give you half a quarter *jau* every day. You will get a blanket once a year along with a

*mirjai*²². What else do you need? It's true that people pay you six *annas* for your labour but I have nothing to do with that. I am keeping you so that you can pay your debts.

After being deeply anxious for a while, Shankar uttered – maharaj, this is but the slavery of a lifetime.

Brahman – Consider it slavery or bonded labour. I shall not leave you without getting my money back. In case you run away –your son will pay for it. It's altogether a different thing if none of you is alive.

There were no channels of appeal against this injustice. Who would stand up for a mere labourer? There was no escape, no place to run. From the next day onwards, Shankar started to work at the brahman's place. In lieu of a quarter *ser* of wheat, Shankar now had to endure the chains of slavery for a lifetime. The only respite for him was that he would think this to be the sin of his previous birth. His wife was compelled to do such works that she never did in her life. Children were hungrier than before but Shankar had no option except being a mute spectator to the sequence of events. Those few grains of wheat, like a curse, never got over from his head.

5

Shankar left this world after toiling for twenty years at the brahman's place. Still, those one hundred and twenty rupees were on his head. Punditjee was kind enough not to trouble Shankar in the God's court in his afterlife. He was not that cruel. He got hold of Shankar's young son. Even till today, the boy is working in brahman's home. Only God knows when he will be freed from this bonded slavery. Or, if at all he will be freed!

²² Jacket of coarse cloth.

Readers! Don't set aside this narrative as a mere product of my imagination. This is a true story. The world is not without such brahmans and Shankars.

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About the Author

Premchand (1880-1936) popularly known as the *kathasamrat* of Hindi literature is almost a touchstone when it comes to the depiction of rural Indian life and especially that of the peasantry. He started to write in Urdu initially but switched to Hindi later. However, he holds a prominent place in both the languages. Along with the well-known novels such as *Sevasadan*, *Nirmala*, *Rangbhoomi*, *Gaban*, *Kayakalp*, *Premashram* and *Godaan*, he almost wrote three hundred stories. He also tried his hands on essays, plays and criticism. Unanimously elected the first president of the Progressive Writers Association in 1936, Premchand delivered a speech titled *Sahitya ka Uddeshya* (The Aim of Literature) – extremely relevant even today.
