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Kisān Mazdūr, Sarmāyadār, Zamīndār

Sa'adat Hasan Manto

Introduced & translated by

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Introduction

I stumbled across Sa'adat Hasan Manto's translated essay in my search for a piece of writing that aligned with the theme of "Justice" for submission at the Ali Jawad Zaidi Memorial Prize for Urdu-English Translation 2026. There was no better place to begin my quest, I figured, than Sa'adat Hassan Manto, an Urdu writer whose writing embodied the political fires and ashes that the early and mid-twentieth century was fraught with. Born in colonial India, Manto's writing had come to recognize that since that the world held no promises, it was important to offer one's own. In a strangely familiar way, his writing reminded me of the well-known Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci who wrote about societal transitions as an interregnum phase where "the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (276).

Reading the essay now, one would not fail to notice how it was borne out of and in response to the unending endurance of this interregnum when old systems were collapsing and new ideals were taking their place. Manto was never at home. He ascribed to socially realist ideals which led him to join the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), an organization formed in 1936 to recast literature as social instruments, until he was ostracized in 1949 for obscenity. Probably best known for his portrayal of the bloodshed of the Partition, he was not interested in narrating the bloodshed, but rather, and more importantly, in exposing the stark political and social realities that it betrayed. In his now prominent short stories "Thanda Gosht" and "Toba Tek Singh," for example, his thrust remained on writing about the dark and wounded

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presents which the Partition's partisans so dearly declared in their speeches. His aim, lest it is otherwise construed, was not to narrate human depravity for he did not derive pleasure from it as his critics often claimed. Rather, he wished to draw attention to the reasons and complexities of that depravity out of sheer shock and incredulity. Dialectically tied to this, one may also say that he carried a certain belief that through his writing, his readers could reach those unwalkable, dirty and forsaken alleys in which the truths had been relegated to live.

Historian and grandniece of Manto, Ayesha Jalal writes that, "Not as well-known as Manto's stories, the biting social critiques in his essays lend themselves well to the writing of histories [...] of the long postcolonial transition." (149). This particular essay, very likely translated by Manto from the socialist materials circulating in India in the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917)—which survived in Indian literature and films well into the 1970s—is an example of his early commitment to socially instrumental writing that was informed very much by left-leaning thought. The original essay seems to be written in a moment when the Russian Revolution brought about a critical reflection of the social systems in place around the world and the ways in which they were detrimental to the progress of the working class. In this regard, it is also critical of the progressives' blind imperative of education that is removed from the realities faced by the working class.

Translated into Urdu by Manto, the essay is a call to uphold justice in the interest of the working class. It is an analysis of the inequalities of economic relations that characterize the difference between the worlds of the workers and that of the educated and the bourgeoisie. As it happens in the essay, in the wake of the Revolution, the workers have come to understand their positions better and demand that the bourgeoisie either let go of their pretense and declare that their objective is ultimately exploitation or align with the workers, relinquish their wealth and take an oath of brotherhood and equality.

Embedded in the essay, is also an effort to engage with the politics of transnational solidarity that has been the characteristic of all major socialist writings. Writing in Urdu about the Russian Revolution in colonial India was definitely a way to speak against the gross exploitation and abuse of the workers and peasants at the hands of the landowners (*zamīndār*). But it was also an act of the instrumentalization of worldly ideas that was made available in late colonial India through predominantly the means of print and travel. For the first time, the 'worker' and the 'landowner' would be clearly identifiable and relational

entities of public discussion both for the reading public in the Soviet Union as well as South Asia. In terms of academic discussion, subaltern theory which emerged as a critical analytical category towards the end of the twentieth century primarily through the writings of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective would contend instead that these structuralist cores of understanding of oppression must be done away with as the working class does not get to write its own history. To that end, what emerges as the peasant in traditional history writing is incompatible as a figure with the realities of the peasant.

Reading the essay in this time of the century, it will be a gross overstatement if I were to say that the moment of writing still resonates. The stakes, the circumstances, the ideas all have taken a turn. For good or for worse, that is open to debate. However, the essence of the question that Manto asks in his translation emanates from a sense of responsibility to narrate. To the worlds of the successive generation(s), he is a figure who never really gave in to the stagnating rhythms of norms. In his straightforward and piercing writing and his dark and bare images, he remains an entangled writer, as much as history itself.



Peasant Laborer, Capitalist, Landowner

The two years of experience of distributing aid in famine-struck regions all but attest to our long-held view that these hardships that we have been trying to resolve from a distant corner of Russia are not symptoms of mere minor ailments. They are, rather, outcomes of those cancerous ills that we educated people and our indifferent attitudes have begotten and which the working class is now dealing with.

Despite offering their labor, and suffering unceasing torment, the workers are dependent on us. But we, with our seemingly irreproachable attitudes, do not even spare a thought for them. If this year, our ears refuse to hear their distressed cries of starvation—wreaking havoc in the lives of thousands of helpless youth let alone elderly and children—and continue to turn a blind eye to their miseries, it does not imply that these adversities will not befall us again. It is as if catastrophes can be overlooked if they don't unfold under our noses. We will try to make ourselves believe that they do not exist and that if they do, it is simply by the laws of nature. That does not concern us, does it? This optimism rests on falsehood. Not only can these crises be prevented but they must be completely destroyed and that time is not far.

We think that our liquor-filled goblets are hidden from the working class. We use ancestral traditions and shrewd arguments to prove our indulgences lawful. We live lives of comfort and amusement in the midst of these workmen who, with their grueling labor and sweat, provide us with our instruments of enjoyment. But now the baton of education is bringing to light our misplaced affiliations, and before long we will be presented as dangerous criminals before the world. Criminals who, at the break of dawn, are caught in the very act of crime.

If a merchant comes to vend dangerous or rotten goods or sells *roḥī* and other items of basic need for a fortune, for which he has paid nothing but peanuts, and then claims to provide for people's needs; if a maker of cigarettes, alcohol or glass professes at the top of his voice to be a benefactor for he offers jobs to the working class; if a clerk whose salary runs into thousands of pounds swears that he acts in the service of our community, and, if a *zamīndār* boasts that it is in the benefit of the village that he purchases exorbitantly priced farming equipment... For if all these pretenses are possible today, if these claims can be made loud and clear when thousands of peasants are dying of hunger, when a *zamīndār* sows potatoes in his fields covering several acres of land for the sole cause of brewing liquor, then, tomorrow these circumstances will change and these false declarations will no longer pollute the air.

Reasonably enough, we are tired of reiterating that the thousands of hunger-stricken—who are subjected to gross labor exploitation but earn meagre wages—do not even have the good fortune to receive stale bread while they provide for our daily necessities. Frolicking in gardens, feasting and enjoying festivities of hunting grounds, drinking parties – even the cheese and meat we eat are available to us only because of their hard labor and our excesses do nothing but put even more strain upon them. But now, we, the people of Russia, are more than capable of comprehending our own realities. I distinctly remember the anecdote centring a youth who came to meet me this past winter. He arrived just in time for us to visit a peasant's home together. In that house, soiled articles were scattered everywhere, women were all pale and yellow, in dangling swathes, and there was a child, sick and wailing; the air was putrid and wretched; sorrow and longing lay everywhere. The yellow faces of the household's inmates were crying for mercy.

I remember when we came out of the hut, the young man was struggling to say something. His tongue seemed stuck to the insides of mouth and he began to cry. He had earlier spent a few months in Moscow and St. Petersburg. He had visited the cities' beautiful gardens, and saw

splendid palaces and he had been where amusements were ever-present; he had attended every gathering of entertainment. Today was the first time he had seen the faces of those who produce these goods of pleasure with their sweat. He was astonished and dejected. Perhaps he had expected that in his wealthy, bohemian community where access to every kind of gathering is possible because of the spread of knowledge, the reward of hard labor would be recognized. Only now, he had come to realize that thousands had to toil in coal mines to produce the instruments of luxury that gave the wealthy pleasure.

Perhaps he will forget those people who sacrifice their lives for our necessities but we, the people of Russia, cannot entertain such thoughts in our minds any more. The disparity between luxury and labor is nothing but glaring and the indulgent ways of one class of people and the poverty of another is for everyone to see. We cannot turn our faces away from the price the working class pay for the lives of revelry and comfort that we enjoy. The sun has set for us and we cannot ignore the emerging reality. It is no longer possible to continue using the government as a facade to legitimize our malicious desires to rule over people. Hiding behind the veil of arts and sciences—indispensable as they are in the present age—or making use of our riches or our rationalization of ancestral traditions, we can neither hide nor carry on our corruption.

The arrows of the sun of reality will tear through all those veils.... At this moment, every individual has awakened to the reality that whoever serves the government is doing so not for the welfare of the people, but to amass wealth. For we are aware of those landowners who expand their cultivation not for mutual interests, but instead, hope to pay for their excesses with the profits.... At this juncture, the issue cannot remain under a shroud any longer. For how long can such falsehood endure? For the affluent class – those who do no labor yet possess a fortune – there are two paths. One way could be that they turn away from religion and all other ideals and disband them, saying:

I am the sole owner of these rights and privileges and I will not abandon them on any condition. If anyone attempts to separate them from me, they will have to contend with my power. I have strength in my arms, I can raise troops, order imprisonments, I can whip and if it comes to it, even hang.

The other path is to admit one's transgressions, to renounce lies, to ask for forgiveness and contribute one's wealth in the larger interests of the people, not merely as lip service as has been the case in the last two years but after acknowledging that this wealth was derived from

laborers' hard work and sweat, yet has been forcefully taken away. To raze those walls that have been erected between us and the working class, not only through rhetoric but also through deeds. To look upon workers as our brothers and alter our current ways of life; to relinquish our individual privileges and profits and collectively labor with the working class so that they benefit from the developments in science and literature—which we are forcing on them without their consent, anyway.

We are standing at crossroads and we have to select one of the two paths. The former leads to perpetual depravity and condemnation. In it, there is a fear of the wrongdoers being revealed in public and an uncertainty of change in every step of the present system. The second path—to sincerely embrace ethical principles with a pure heart and to unrelentingly endeavor in that cause—is open. For these principles will be shown to be true by human intellect today or tomorrow. If not us, then the coming generations will definitely make that certain. Eradicating this *hubris* is the only way to save our community and nation from calamities and miseries. Abstaining from weaving falsehoods, refraining from indulgences and forging a fraternity is the most fitting cure for all such maladies.

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