



I N F O C U S

Decline of a Social Order: The End of Zamindari Rule in Northern India

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Rahi Masoom Raza, *Aadha Gaon*.¹

Rahi was the pen-name of poet and writer Masoom Raza. He was born in 1927, in a Shia Muslim zamindar (landlord) family of Ghazipur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Ghazipur is a large town, now the headquarters of a district in the State.² Members of Rahi's family owned land in the village of Gangauli, a few miles away from Ghazipur town. While many of their relatives lived in Gangauli, Rahi's father and uncle, who were prominent local lawyers, practised in Ghazipur but maintained very close relations with the village, where they also spent the ten days of Moharram every year.³

Throughout his early years of childhood Rahi spent time with his family in the village, and the language spoken in Gangauli, Bhojpuri (or Bhojpuri Urdu as he calls it), was the first language that he heard and spoke. When he was about six years old, he was taken ill with tuberculosis and polio, and had to spend months on end in bed. A family retainer was given the task of keeping him amused by telling him stories. Rahi was an avid listener. He also became an avid reader, devouring books first during his illness and then throughout his life. He completed his early education in Ghazipur

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¹ The novel was first published in 1984; the edition used in this review is Raza (2009) and page numbers of quotations from the novel included here are from this edition.

² The British imposed a system of statutory landlordism known as zamindari over a large part of their northern possessions under what was called the Permanent Settlement of 1793. This displaced the Mughal land revenue system under which the zamindars were essentially revenue collectors. With the Permanent Settlement, the zamindars acquired full proprietary rights to the land in return for the payment of a fixed annual rent. The inflexibility of the system put enormous pressure on the peasantry who were relentlessly squeezed by the zamindars' demands. Abolition of zamindari took different forms after Independence. In Uttar Pradesh, the Congress government decided to issue non-negotiable bonds to zamindars whose lands were taken from them; these were not convertible to cash. A large number of zamindars in the State were Muslims and the community was hard-hit by the measure; this became an additional reason for many of them to migrate to Pakistan.

³ Moharram commemorates the martyrdom of Hussain, grandson of Prophet Mohammad, who is deeply venerated by the Shias.

and went on to study at the Aligarh Muslim University, where he ultimately gained a PhD in Urdu literature. It was in Aligarh also that Rahi Masoom Raza became a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Aligarh Muslim University at the time had an influential group of Leftist students and professors who, because of their talent and erudition, drew many to the Communist movement. Rahi's home village, Ghazipur, was also an important centre of the Communist movement. The legendary Communist leader Sarjoo Pandey was a well-known and much-loved leader of landless workers and poor peasants in the region.⁴ His was a household name, and Rahi had heard accounts of his exploits, struggles, and sacrifices from childhood.

Rahi came to be recognised as an important member of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) while still a student.⁵ In 1957, he wrote a long epic poem on the 1857 War of Independence, which attained the status of a classic. He was equally at home with fiction. While teaching at Aligarh Muslim University, he wrote his magnum opus, *Aadha Gaon*, in Urdu. It was published in the Hindi script and is recognised as one of the most important novels of modern Hindi literature. Other novels by Rahi, such as *Topi Shukla* and *Dil Ek Saada Kaghaz*, followed soon.

In 1967, Rahi eloped with a married woman, and had to leave Aligarh Muslim University in a hurry. He arrived penniless in Bombay. Very soon, however, he established himself as a successful writer of scripts and screenplays. Many Hindi movies written by him, including *Mili*, *Golmaal*, and *Lamhe*, were commercial hits. It is as the writer of the screenplay for the television serial *Mahabharat*, however, that Rahi Masoom Raza is remembered by many.

Rahi remained committed to progressive thought and secularism throughout his life. He strongly opposed the Emergency,⁶ and because the CPI and the PWA supported it, he resigned from both and joined the Janvadi Lekhak Sangh (Democratic Writers' Association).⁷ As a secular person who believed strongly that religion should be kept apart from the sphere of politics, Rahi was a bitter critic of the compromises made

⁴ Sarjoo Pandey (1919–1989) was an outstanding freedom fighter and a Member of Parliament in independent India from 1957 to 1977.

⁵ The Progressive Writers Association (PWA) was founded in the mid-1930s in London by a group of Left-leaning Indian intellectuals. A conference of Hindi and Urdu writers was held in Lucknow in 1936, presided over by the celebrated Hindi novelist Premchand, and organised by writers such as Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, and Rasheed Jahan. The PWA was committed to anti-imperialism and progressive, socialist values. Some of the greatest poets and writers in Hindi and Urdu in the decades preceding and following India's Independence were associated with the PWA.

⁶ In 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of national emergency in India, suspending the constitutional and legal rights of the people. Freedom of speech, expression, and the press were among the many rights that were suspended during the period of the Emergency.

⁷ The Janvadi Lekhak Sangh (Democratic Writers' Association) was established in 1982 by Hindi and Urdu poets and writers who were close to the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

by the Rajiv Gandhi government with regard to the Shah Bano issue.⁸ At one time he said that he had begun to hate religion because of the terrible consequences religious prejudice and strife had brought in their wake.

Rahi died in Mumbai in 1992 at the age of 64, leaving behind an impressive body of work comprising poetry, prose, and film scripts.

THE NOVEL

Aadha Gaon occupies a unique place in modern Hindi literature. Its language, idiom, humour, and its insights into the lives of a small group of Shia Muslim zamindar families and their relationships with other people of different castes and religions in a tiny village, Gangauli, in what is now the Ghazipur district of eastern Uttar Pradesh, contribute to its significant status in the literature of Hindi-speaking rural India.

The language that Rahi wrote in was Bhojpuri Urdu, the language of his home and family. Bhojpuri is the language spoken across eastern Uttar Pradesh and in the adjoining districts of Bihar, and Bhojpuri Urdu was spoken by the landed gentry, Muslim and often Hindu, until well after Independence. Rahi's Bhojpuri, laced with Urdu poetry and imagery, makes liberal use of words drawn from Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. The men of his family were by and large bilingual, speaking Urdu (also known as Khadi Boli) in public, especially in urban settings, and Bhojpuri at home and in their ancestral village. The women, however, spoke only Bhojpuri, and they were highly irritated by people, especially women, who spoke Khadi Boli or urban Urdu, which they considered to be the language of courtesans, who were known (and feared) for their sophistication, refinement, and seductive immorality.

Rahi's rendition is faithful not only to the use of language in his village, but also to the subject matter of its everyday rural conversations – lust, love, adultery, fornication, buggery, spiteful gossip, poetry, dirges, political developments, and social upheavals. Colourful expletives are as frequent across the pages of the novel as they must have been in both friendly and unfriendly conversations between the people among whom he grew up.

Unsurprisingly, every Urdu publishing house to which he sent his manuscript returned it in horror. It was an abomination, far removed from the refined Urdu writing to which they were accustomed. As a result, *Aadha Gaon* was finally

⁸ This refers to a landmark ruling of the Indian Supreme Court in 1984 ordering the payment of maintenance to a Muslim woman petitioner, 73-year-old Shah Bano from Indore, by her husband who had denied her maintenance on the grounds that such a practice was forbidden by Islam. Under pressure from conservative Muslim leaders and religious heads, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi brought in legislation that nullified the judgement. This measure had very far-reaching consequences and fuelled the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was only an emerging political force at the time.

published in Hindi. It was received with both revulsion and acclaim, and eventually was accorded the place of honour in modern Hindi literature that it continues to occupy. In an act of exceptional courage, Professor Namvar Singh (a fellow Communist), despite protests from many sympathetic to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was successful in having the novel included in the syllabus of the Hindi Department of the University of Jodhpur. Since then, it has found its way into the syllabi of many universities and into most libraries in India, and it continues to be read widely.

Many readers of *Aadha Gaon* have experienced it as a remarkable literary *tour de force* that evokes nostalgia for a lost era of feudal relationships in a small and isolated village. Others have commented on its sense of humanity, and the humane relationships between different communities that it portrays. These interpretations are influenced by the lyrical descriptions of the rhythms and cycles of the weather, customs, and rituals that are present in the novel, and also by a general tendency to romanticise and idealise the Indian village. As a matter of fact, however, *Aadha Gaon* documents not just these aspects of a feudal setting, but also the arbitrary cruelty that was integral to the zamindari system.

The novel is set in the period from about a decade-and-a-half before Independence to the first half of the decade after 1947. Change, transition, and exposure to the outside world are never absent from the small village of Gangauli, but they accelerate considerably in the war years and then in the tumultuous years of Independence, Partition, and the abolition of zamindari.

The title of the novel – *Aadha Gaon* – has been interpreted in at least two ways. Literally, it means “semi-village”: a reference not only to the rapid changes Gangauli underwent during the years covered by the novel, but also to the strong links forged by migration between the village and the industrial metropolises of the time, namely Bombay, Calcutta, Dhaka, and Kanpur. The title can also be interpreted as meaning “half the village,” since the writer-protagonist is concerned mostly with the lives, lifestyle, and preoccupations of the zamindar families – that is, with only half the village. Even when the novel speaks of the other people in the village, it describes, for the most part, their relationships and interactions with the zamindar families.

Aadha Gaon does not have a conventional plot. It does not follow the lives of any or most of the characters to any conclusion. It describes the lives of a group of Shia Muslim zamindars, and their relationships with one another and with others who lived in the village over a period of about 25 years. When the novel opens, the zamindars are secure in the knowledge that their world will continue forever, their incomes and status remaining unchanged. This illusion does not last for long, however, for Independence and Partition are only a few years away.

The most important event in the early years covered by the book is the conflict between the zamindars on the south side of the zamindars' quarters and those on the north side. There has always been a spirit of rivalry between them. Even the children are victims of this. Who weeps more copious tears during the Moharram *marsiya*, *sozkhani*, and *ma'atam* (various forms of lamentation during the Moharram rituals)? Among the children, who faints with grief? Years of mutual recrimination reach an explosive point when one side counters the grand *tazia* of the other with a rival one.⁹ Physical attacks follow, and many zamindars and their supporters of the south side go to jail because those of the north side have the attacker's advantage and are able to bribe the police. This important event, a result of the internal dynamics of village society, changes the lives of many of the inhabitants of the village.

Although the novel depicts romances and inter-caste relationships that develop between young men and women in the village, it is developments outside the village – the national movement, the World War, elections, the movement for Pakistan, and abolition of zamindari – that really animate the novel and influence the lives of those who inhabit it.

The first page of the writer's elegiac introduction to his world of Ghazipur and Gangauli describes the pain of separation that migration brings in its wake. This is a region where many have never ventured out from their villages, but are nevertheless familiar with the names of cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Kanpur, and Dhaka, names that strike terror in the hearts of the women left behind. In Hindi, *virah* means separation; in this region, it is the term for an entire genre of folksongs. The words of the songs that Rahi quotes in his introduction are unmistakably the words of sorrowing women:

लगा झूलनी का धक्का, बलम कलकत्ता चले गये। (p. 9)

My nose-ring suffers a blow, my beloved has gone away to Calcutta.¹⁰

बरसत में कोऊ घर से ना निकसे, तुमहिं अनूक बिदेस जवैया (p. 10)

No one leaves home during the rains, you are unique in leaving for a strange land.

Ever-growing unemployment because of landlessness and the backward methods of farming that characterised the zamindari system, and the impact of the many oppressions of zamindari are responsible for this migration to the big cities, which hold out hope and the promise of refuge to many seeking escape from poverty and social ostracism. The big cities offer the worker both anonymity and livelihood. The

⁹ A *tazia* is a replica of the Karbala in Iraq, which is the memorial to the martyr Hussain, grandson of Prophet Mohammed. The battlefield where Hussain was martyred was also named Karbala. *Tazias* are of all sizes and range from the simple to the ornate. They are made of wood and covered with coloured paper or cloth, and are carried in processions during Moharram, the day Hussain is believed to have been killed.

¹⁰ The nose-ring is a symbol of a woman's married status. In this lament, the woman says that it is her very status as a married woman that suffers a blow when her husband migrates to Calcutta.

migration of men who leave behind their wives and families is referred to at the very beginning of the novel, and the various cities to which they migrate for work are mentioned. Their stories, however, are not a part of the main narrative, which is focused on the lives of the Shia landlords of the village. It is only when one of the stories, that of Bachhaniya, intersects with that of one of the zamindars, Maulvi Bedar, that migration is discussed in any detail.¹¹ Maulvi Bedar has no wife. His closest female relative is his married niece. He is drawn to Bachhaniya, a lower-caste Muslim girl who has matured into an attractive woman. Maulvi Bedar is determined to marry her despite the advice he receives from his peers to do what is socially acceptable, which is to take her on as a mistress. His infuriated niece descends on the village. She first goes to the home of another zamindar family where she vents her anger. When she finally meets her uncle, she subjects him to a terrible tongue-lashing: her anger is a result of both her fear of not inheriting her uncle's property and the loss of face that his proposed marriage will mean for her. The Maulvi, however, does not give up his determination to marry Bachhaniya. Of course, no one thinks of asking her what she thinks. It is assumed that she will be completely dazzled at the prospect of becoming a zamindar's lawfully wedded wife. In actual fact, however, she is horrified at the thought of marrying a much older man. She is involved with a young man, Safirva, and she elopes to Calcutta with him; he finds work there in a jute mill. Thus, the couple finds security in the anonymity of the city.

THE VILLAGE THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

Masoom (Rahi's given name), the protagonist of *Aadha Gaon*, is the son of one of the most prominent Shia landlord families of Gangauli. His father and uncle are leading lawyers in Ghazipur, the town near Gangauli which is now the district headquarters. Masoom lives in the town and goes to school there but the entire family comes to Gangauli for Moharram every year.

Aadha Gaon opens with five-/six-year-old Masoom arriving in the village with his family on a lorry, a major novelty for people at that time used to travelling in animal-driven carriages. He is a quick-witted child, full of curiosity. Since children have the freedom to enter all zamindar homes (which are connected to each other through courtyards and doorways), he listens in on conversations, witnesses scenes of homosexuality and adultery, and hears all kinds of gossip. He is both a listener and a teller of stories of his village, of his family and other families like his, and of people who belong to different castes and communities. He is intrigued by the mysterious ways of the adults around him, by their attitude towards those who belong to the oppressed castes, both Hindu and Muslim, and their strange relationships with women. Through the child Masoom's eyes, Rahi the writer describes the world and the realities he had experienced in his childhood and youth.

¹¹ A *maulana* is a Muslim male who has learned the Sharia law and the Quran. His duties include teaching the Quran to young persons, leading prayers, and interpreting Islamic law.

Early in the novel Masoom is shown running through the labyrinths of Sayyad zamindars' homes, running away from his mother who is determined to "kill" him for having troubled his older sister (p. 16). He finds refuge under Naeema Dadi's bed, where he falls into a reverie. Naeema belongs to the weaver caste and is the second wife of one of Masoom's granduncles. Because of her caste, she cannot sit with the Sayyad ladies as an equal. He then wonders why another of his relatives has abandoned his own light-skinned, sweet-natured wife for a prostitute whom the zamindar women (who have never laid eyes on her) describe as dark-skinned and ugly (and therefore Bengali). The truth is that she is from Bara Banki in Uttar Pradesh, but since many men from Gangauli and its neighbourhood migrate to Dhaka and Calcutta, it is alleged that they have been seduced there by Bengali women, who are vilified as seductresses of the migrant men.

Masoom is aware that no one holds it against his uncle that he has taken a prostitute into his home. This is not only considered as perfectly normal for a zamindar, but also as something that adds to his status. Masoom also knows – although this is also one of the mysteries he is trying to unravel – that there are illegitimate children in all zamindar families. He recalls the case of Damdi Bo ("bo" means wife and Damdi is the name of the husband, thus "Damdi's wife"). Damdi, now dead, had been brought up in the household of one of Masoom's relatives. With their help he set up a bookshop and, in line with his newly acquired status, took on a new and respectable name: Sayyad Nadir Ali Tajir Kutuub (bookseller). Nevertheless, reflects Masoom, Damdi Bo remained Damdi Bo – and remained so even after Damdi's death and going through two more husbands. Masoom's thoughts run on:

बेनाम होना तो बहुओं की तकदीर है। फ़र्क़ बस इतना हो जाता है कि वह अच्छे घरानों में 'बो' की ज़िल्लत से बच जाती हैं, वह या तो बहू कही जाती हैं या दुल्हन या दुल्हिन . . . गरज़ कि हमारे समाज में या तो यह होता है कि मैकेवाले जहेज़ देकर बेटी से अपना दिया हुआ नाम छीन लेते हैं या फिर यह कहिये कि ससुरालवाले इसे ग़वारा नहीं करते कि उनके यहाँ किसी और घर का दिया हुआ नाम चले . . . बेनाम रहना शायद ज़मींदारों और उनके हवालियों-मवालियों की बेटियों की तकदीर है; . . . बस, यही एक ऐसी इज़्ज़त है जो किसी रखनी को नहीं मिलती, और शायद इसीलिए ये शरीफ़ लड़कियाँ अपनी बेनामी को झेल जाती हैं। (p. 23)

Being nameless seems to be the fate of daughters-in-law. The only difference is that in well-to-do homes they are spared the ignominy of being known as "Bo." Here they are known as daughter-in-law. It appears that in our society either the girl's own family takes away her name when they give her a dowry, or her in-laws are not willing to allow a name given by others to be used in their home. Remaining nameless is the fate

of women in zamindar homes, and in the homes of their dependants and hangers-on. This is the only form of respect that is denied to their concubines and that is probably why well-bred girls are prepared to suffer their namelessness.

This namelessness of well-bred women is, of course, indicative of their status within their families. Even though many of them were zamindars in their own right and owners of bigger landholdings than their husbands, control over their property was handed over by them or taken away from them to become the prerogative of men in their families. But men of oppressed-caste households also had their names taken away from them, or had to suffer distortion of their names by landlord-employers. There is an account in the novel of a family that had a servant called Sharfua (diminutive for Sharif). Sharfua died, but his successor, who had another name, also became “Sharfua” because the family was used to this being the name of their servant. The second “Sharfua” ran away, and his successor too was called Sharfua by his employers. Shared namelessness was indicative of similarities of status between women of zamindar families, and domestic servants and other dependants of those families.

Masoom’s reverie under the bed is brought to an abrupt halt when he is yanked by the hair and dragged out by his enraged mother.

Caste and gender and their complexities are never far from the child’s thoughts. As the lorry carrying him and his family enters the village, he sees a group of semi-naked, oppressed-caste boys standing by the roadside. He wants to know why they are not wearing pyjamas and his uncle says: “Because they are bastards!” A few hours later, while wandering about the village, Masoom comes across some children of the weaver caste playing *kabaddi* and he joins them. In the course of the game he is surrounded by the other team, but he valiantly continues to mutter “*kabaddi, kabaddi*” until he is drained of breath. Suddenly, he is rescued by rough hands and hears Gaya Ahir (an oppressed-caste Hindu who is a loyal worker in a zamindar home) shout at the weaver-boys: “So now you think you are high up enough to play *kabaddi* with zamindar boys?” He picks Masoom up and says to him, “You are a Miya [of a zamindar family]. You should not have done this.”

Moments later Masoom is accosted by Gorey Da, a relative and an occasional visitor to the village who is a *tahsildar* (a taluk-level or sub-district-level official). He tries to make Masoom reply to his questions in Khadi Boli, but the boy finds the words harsh and unfamiliar. In his years as a child and as a young boy, Rahi had noticed changes in the way people spoke and correctly attributed these to changes in status and lifestyle. Gorey Da, for example, is a petty government functionary and spends most of his time in towns and cities. He speaks only Khadi Boli and wants the children of fellow zamindars to follow suit. He is also keen – and this, at the time, was almost blasphemous – that they learn and speak English.

A few years later in the narrative Rahi describes Hammad, a zamindar of Gangauli, who takes to speaking Khadi Boli after he acquires additional landed property by various means, some questionable, and begins to cultivate much of the land directly. Although direct cultivation seriously compromises his zamindar status and earns him the condemnation of his peers, he feels more than compensated by the wealth he earns in the process. He builds a large house built of cement, brick, and plaster and insists on speaking Khadi Boli, sneering at Bhojpuri as *ganvaaru*, a word that means “rural” but with additional connotations of ignorance and backwardness. Hammad also bullies his wife and daughters into speaking Khadi Boli. They dislike this language being imposed on them but speak it whenever Hammad enters the family home. Because of his insistence domestic matters are never discussed when Hammad is at home, because it is impossible for his wife and daughters to speak of family matters in a “foreign” language. As a result, the home lacks an informal or comfortable atmosphere.

A hilarious sequence begins when Hammad’s wife begins to scold her daughters in Bhojpuri,

मैं ई कह रहियूँ कि . . .

I’m telling you . . .

then stops herself and continues in Khadi Boli,

का तुम लोगों का दिमाग खराब हो गया है?

Have you gone mad?

and finally voices her frustration in Bhojpuri:

ऊँह भाइ में जाये ई निखौँदी बोली ! (p. 212)

To hell with this wretched language!

Her daughters take advantage of her linguistic confusion and run out of the room. Later her husband chastises her for not disciplining her daughters and she remonstrates, saying that she is helpless because she is unable to scold them in “his” language. Why doesn’t he allow her to speak in her own?

It is difficult for the zamindars and their families to deal with Hammad after he has acquired wealth and abandoned zamindari traditions. His fall from grace is attributed, characteristically, to the fact that he has a weaver (lower-caste) mother. The women of the zamindar families, of course, do not hide their irritation with his stuck-up wife and daughters.

Matters worsen for the zamindars, and more so for the women, when a dalit of the Chamar caste, Parsuram, whose father was their dependant and socially inferior to

them in every way, becomes first a Congress worker (before Independence) and then a Congress leader (after Independence), and begins to speak in Khadi Boli (while sitting on a chair!) in the presence of the zamindars. With this, the death knell of the established social order begins to toll. When Parsuram's wife, too, starts speaking Khadi Boli (of a garbled kind), and enters a zamindar home and plonks herself down on the bed, the tolling is impossible to ignore. Changes in the way people speak are among the earliest symbols of change that Masoom notices in the village.

It is interesting that while there are several references to Parsuram, they are all in the context of his relationship with one or another of the zamindars. There is no delineation of his own career. From various references we learn that he was born into a very poor Chamar family. His father found employment in the District Magistrate's residence in Ghazipur and this access to authority helped Parsuram's family, which used this closeness to authority to influence cases fought at different times between the zamindars. These unusual circumstances helped Parsuram to escape the drudgery and poverty that would have been his fate. He joined the Congress Party just before Independence and was an effective organiser. Later he was able to contest an Assembly seat reserved for the Scheduled Castes and to win it. This, naturally, changed his relationship with the zamindars, and he was soon sitting on a chair in their presence and being sought out to help them with various disputes. Parsuram explains his frequent use of Khadi Boli to them by saying that he has to go to the State capital, Lucknow, very often and that he has to speak in Khadi Boli there in order to be taken seriously.

Parsuram's changed status and behaviour rankles with the zamindars, but they are nevertheless forced to treat him with respect. How intolerable this is for them is illustrated by the fact that, in the course of a dispute between two zamindars, one of them gets Parsuram named, arrested, and finally convicted in a false case.

The observance of Moharram is central to the narrative of the novel and, incredibly enough, that too undergoes changes. The child Masoom has grown accustomed to the rituals associated with each of the ten days of Moharram, when the village comes alive. Although Moharram commemorates a tragedy, it brings with it many welcome arrivals of relatives and friends, besides regular visitors. Not only are the 10 or 15 Shia zamindar families immersed in its observance, but also, in different ways, the other people of the village – Muslim and Hindu – are drawn into participation. Different roles are assigned to them – joining in the processions, showing their prowess with the *lathi*, and (this for children) grabbing the sweetmeats that are distributed as *tabarruk* (*prasad* or consecrated food). Moharram, in fact, provides the occasion for building and rebuilding village solidarity that seems to subsume differences of every kind. This is an illusionary solidarity, of course, but nevertheless contributes significantly to the strength, acceptability, and durability of the zamindari system.

With the scarcities of the war years, Independence, and zamindari abolition, the fortunes of the zamindars undergo abrupt transformation. The ritual observance of Moharram, unchanged over many decades, changes radically. Fewer members of the zamindar families come back to the village than before; the velvets and silks of the *imambara* decorations fade and fray; the clothes of members of the zamindar families are shabby and darned; the quantity and quality of the *tabarruk* decline.¹² Moharram becomes a shadow of what it was.

The book begins with six-year-old Masoom visiting Gangauli. He returns six years later, on the verge of his teens. Political discussion has become commonplace as young men from Gangauli go to Aligarh Muslim University and return with Muslim League ideas and activist friends; the war years and wartime inflation and scarcity affect the zamindars' lives of ease and plenty; caste barriers become more fluid than ever and an old way of life – and its hierarchies – seem to be slipping away. These same war years, however, have been years of opportunity for the Rakis, the Muslim trading community of the village, who have become extremely rich but continue to sit on chairs with seats of tin in the presence of the zamindars!

The possibility of the British leaving India becomes a frightening reality. Partition and Independence are the twin dangers ahead. Most of the zamindars are completely bewildered by these eventualities. They try and draw comfort from the fact that Gangauli is not going to become part of Pakistan and, for that reason, the problem is not their concern. But communal tension, the outbreak of riots, and stories of brutal massacres can neither be ignored nor dealt with. The fact of being a minority within a minority, a minority that does not expect any sympathy or support from its Sunni brethren, is further disquieting.

The child Masoom (the name itself means “innocent”) grows into his teens shedding the happy certainties of his childhood, in much the same way that the people of his village shed the old and struggle with new uncertainties, new fears, and loss of hope.

ZAMINDARI LANDLORDISM

Rahi belonged to a zamindar family. He wrote about the world to which he belonged and knew: that of the Shia zamindars of Ghazipur. He wrote with pitiless honesty, his pen a rapier that cut away the outer covers of zamindari and laid bare its cruelty and oppression. He was familiar with myriad aspects of the social relations that zamindari created – relations that encompassed different structures of interdependence, rights, and duties. Zamindari varied greatly between villages and regions. It created social and cultural institutions that established strong bonds not only between social equals, but also among people of different classes and social

¹² The *imambara* is a structure used for prayers and observation of Moharram rituals by Shia Muslims. Most Shia homes have small *imambaras* where various symbols of Shia belief are displayed. They are not used for regular prayers (*namaaz*).

groups. Such institutions kept alive a sense – an illusory sense but a social feeling nevertheless – that the village was a community and an organic whole. The ultimate social function of these institutions was, however, as Rahi shows, to keep zamindari alive.

The inequalities, oppressions, and cruelties of the zamindari system share space on every page of the novel with Rahi's often hilarious and always interesting descriptions of the whimsicality, likeability, loyalty, and generosity of individual members of zamindar families – but the same persons could also exhibit terrible arrogance and physical violence towards those who were not their social equals (including the women in their families).

The cruelty of zamindari *as a system* was understood by all those living within its boundaries: victims as well as perpetrators. A schoolmaster tries to convince Chhikuria, who belongs to a backward Hindu caste known as Bhar, that Muslims should be objects of hate, justifying himself by referring to the harsh behaviour of Muslim zamindars. Chhikuria differentiates between the Muslim and the zamindar:

. . . बाकी जेहके पास ज़मींदारी होई, उहके जुलम जरूर करे के पड़ी। ना करी तो ज़मींदारी ना चली, औरी मियाँहू लोग ज़मींदारे हौवन। (p. 173)

He who is a zamindar has to be brutal. If he is not brutal, there is no zamindari left – and Muslims are zamindars, too.

A little later, he strengthens the argument thus:

त हम त ई देखत बाड़ीं कि बारीखपुर के ठाकुरो साहिब जुलम करे में गंगौली के मियाँ लोगन से कम ना हौवन। (p. 174)

And I can see that the Thakur Sahab of Bārīkhpur is the equal of the Gangauli Muslim landlords as far as brutality is concerned.

In a few sentences, Rahi describes a big zamindar, Asharfullah Khan of Salimpur, a village neighbouring Gangauli (p. 99). When a friend from Gangauli visits Asharfullah Khan and is to leave, Asharfullah sees him off, providing him with two escorts: dalit men who work for him and are referred to as *begaar* (bonded labour). On their way back, the group is attacked by some people from Gangauli who are loyal to a person who has been harmed by a friend of Asharfullah's. Despite the fact that the attackers, "low-caste" Hindus, are well-known to the *begaar* and are, in fact, their friends, the two dalit men do everything to protect their landlord's friend and are beaten severely in the process. Asharfullah's friend is ultimately rescued and escorted back to Gangauli. The two injured, bleeding *begaar* return to Salimpur and report to Asharfullah that they had carried out his instructions faithfully. The blood oozing from their many wounds and bruises is proof of their loyalty, which is, of course, taken completely for granted by Khan. He rewards them with a pinch of tobacco each and one rupee between them. He then goes back to bed.

... अंदर जाकर वह फिर लेट गये और दो बाँदियाँ चंपी करने लगीं। बगलवाली मसहरी पर उनकी बेगम खैरुन्निसा ... गोद की बच्ची को दूध पिला रही थीं ... यह खैरुन खान साहब से कोई पाँच वर्ष बड़ी थी। बहुत ही बदसूरत थी। लेकिन सगी चचेरी बहन थी और अपने बाप की इकलौती थी। आठ आने ज़मींदारी का मामला था। इसलिए अशरफुल्ला खाँ के पिता ने खैरुन्निसा उर्फ खैरुन के पिता से राय-बात की और अशरफुल्ला खैरुन से ब्याह दिये गये। उन्होंने कोई ऐतराज़ इसलिए नहीं किया कि उन्हें तो शौक ही और था, लेकिन उन्होंने मियाँ बनने में कंजूसी नहीं दिखायी। खैरुन के यहाँ ताबड़-तोड़ अठारह बच्चे पैदा हुए ... (pp. 101-2)

[Asharfullah Khan] went in and lay down again and two bondswomen began to massage his body. His wife Khairunnisa lay in the four-poster next to him, nursing their child. This Khairun was five years older than Khan Saheb. She was very ugly. But she was also a first cousin and her father's only child. Her portion was half a zamindari. And for that reason, Asharfullah Khan's father had negotiated the matter with Khairunnisa's father and Asharfullah was given to her in marriage. Asharfullah did not object, since his tastes lay in another direction altogether, although he showed no miserliness in doing his duties as a husband. Khairun gave birth to 18 children in quick succession.

Caste and gender oppression, the prevalence of unpaid bonded labour and the violence to which such labour was subjected; the fact that ownership of land bestowed the greatest eligibility on a woman from a landlord family; a landlord's debauchery – all of these are put into words by Rahi in inimitable Bhojpuri Urdu.

In the decades before Independence, when *Aadha Gaon* begins, rents and shares of produce received from the land that they owned were the main sources of income for the zamindars of Gangauli, but not the only ones. One of the landlords is a *hakim* (a practitioner of Unani medicine), another is a religious teacher, one is a functionary in the government, and Masoom's father and uncles are prominent, successful lawyers who maintain establishments in Ghazipur town. For many of them income from the land they own has become secondary and it is the ownership of land that gives them status.

There are many references to how the zamindars use their land to exert control and bestow patronage. A singer of *marsiya* (the dirges of Moharram) is given some land so that he can live in the village and contribute to the Moharram observances. Gifts of land are also made to religious establishments and for the performance of various kinds of religious rituals.

The landless in the village have to keep the zamindars in good humour in order to continue to lease land from them for cultivation. Despite the fact that it is the

labour, unpaid services, and loyalty of the tenants that sustain the zamindars' standards of living, the renewal of lease to a tenant takes the form of a favour being granted by landlord to worker. Refusal to renew a lease is the punishment of choice for a real or imagined slight or for an inadequate show of loyalty.

Restrictions take different forms. Despite being a Muslim, Phunnan Miya, a zamindar, gives land to a Hindu Pandit to construct a temple. When the Pandit becomes a Hindu religious fanatic and campaigner against Muslims, the fact of having bestowed a favour on him restrains Phunnan Miya from physically assaulting him. This is a typical example of zamindar arrogance – Phunnan Miya feels that because he has done the Pandit a favour for which the Pandit has not shown the requisite gratitude, he in turn cannot repay him in the same coin because of his status as a bestower of favours.

While the renewal of leases was usually more or less automatic, often with the imposition of additional conditions and burdens, it was also used to settle scores and as a means to make money. When the rivalry between the two groups of zamindars in the village – those living in the south and those living in the north – becomes acute, and they take to filing false cases against each other and using foul means to humiliate each other, tenancy is used as an instrument of attack.

An interesting example in the novel of how this great need of the landless for a piece of land to cultivate was exploited is the way in which Phunnan Miya – a small landlord of great physical strength and courage – makes an ally of a dalit of the Chamar caste in his village by getting a landlord of another village to lease him a fertile piece of land. Phunnan Miya goes to meet Asharfullah Khan and promises him a favour. As he is leaving, he says casually,

ऊ लखना चमार कल आया रहा। ऊ कुँवाली ज़िमिनिया ऊ को काहे न दे देते
आप। पान सै नज़राना दे रहा। (p. 137)

Lakhna Chamar came to meet me yesterday. Why don't you lease that piece of land near the well to him? He's ready to give you an advance of 500 rupees.

Asharfullah Khan's reply is significant because it throws light on important changes that are taking place in the zamindar-tenant relationship:

वह साला . . . ठाकुर कुँवरपाल सिंह से मुकदमा लड़ रहा। वह हारकर रह
गये कि बेदखली करवा लें। खेत कटवाने गये तो चमार भी लट्ठ लेकर आ
गये। इन कांग्रेसवालों ने नाक में दम कर दिया है। अब नीच जातवाले भी
आँख उठाकर बात करना चाहते हैं।

That wretch! He's actually fighting a case against Thakur Kunwarpal Singh in court. Thakur Kunwarpal Singh did everything to evict him. When he went to destroy the crops on his land, all the Chamars took up *lathis* against him. I'm fed up with these Congressmen. Because of them these low-caste people now dare look us in the eye.

Phunнан Miya continues unperturbed and offers 800 rupees. Ashrafullah Khan replies that he is thinking of giving the land out on *bantai* (crop-sharing). Phunнан Miya rebukes him: "Have we been reduced to this? The Khan Sahab of Salimpur is ready to give his field out to a sharecropper?" He strokes his menacing moustache and continues: "Lakhna may be ready to give 1000 rupees." Ashrafullah Khan agrees to this. Phunнан Miya is more than satisfied because Lakhna had actually agreed to give 1200 rupees. When he meets Lakhna, he tells him that with great difficulty he has persuaded Ashrafullah Khan to agree to an advance payment of 1500 rupees. Thus he earns not only 500 rupees as a bonus, but also Lakhna's unswerving loyalty.

This episode is extremely informative about relations between the landed and landless, and also about the peculiar arrogance of landlords towards the "untouchable" landless: the zamindars consider themselves superior to the dalit landless but have no compunctions about cheating them (p. 137).

Hammad is the only zamindar to appropriate land and cultivate it himself. He is, of course, ridiculed for having broken with the traditions of zamindari, but he reaps such advantage from what he is doing that he feels more than compensated. Hammad's son Mighdad does physical work on his fields, tending to his animals and dressed in a dhoti like an ordinary farmer. He takes great pride in what he does, and his sense of confidence gives him the courage to marry a Muslim woman belonging to a barber caste. He is advised to take her on as a mistress but he refuses. A few years after his marriage a cousin of Masoom's, Tannu, comes to the village after an absence of six years. Mighdad shows him around the village, pointing out all the new houses that have been constructed. Tannu stops in front of Rahim's house (Rahim is Mighdad's father-in-law) and asks about him. Mighdad tells Tannu that since he had insisted on marrying Rahim's daughter, not a single person other than the Maulvi had accompanied his marriage procession. His marriage had also brought to a close the feud between zamindars of the northern quarter and the southern quarter, since they were all united against it. They felt that their "noses had been cut" (their prestige had suffered a terrible blow). The headman of the barber community was told by the landlords that if he did not punish the bride's father, Rahim, he would be deprived of the land that he was tilling. As a result, Rahim was punished with social boycott. No merchant would sell him anything and Hammad took away from him the land that he had been cultivating. Soon afterwards his wife died and Rahim left the village forever.

Mighdad is a symbol of a democratic consciousness developing alongside pride in physical labour. He not only dares to defy his community and openly marry a "low-caste" woman, but also refuses to be cowed down in any way. It is interesting that he seems to approve of the legendary Communist leader from Ghazipur, Sarjoo Pandey, to whom he gives a donation of one rupee. Mighdad's love for the woman he marries is exceptional; so also is the fact that even after marriage, he treats her with affection and consideration – more than is imaginable in zamindar households.

Misogyny in zamindar households was nothing short of horrible. It also set the standard for all other members of society. In the novel, physical abuse of wives is commonplace, and the wives in turn think nothing of beating and abusing their children – especially, of course, their daughters. Apart from physical abuse, the women are subjected to all kinds of humiliation. And women of socially privileged families are not sparing in heaping humiliation on women whom they consider to be lower than them in the social hierarchy.

While the zamindar women consider themselves to be socially superior to all lower-caste women, both Hindu and Muslim, they are prisoners of their own upper-caste status. They are denied access to and interaction with the outside world. Outside their houses they are carried in covered palanquins. Formal education is something that they cannot imagine for themselves, and so they look down upon it and declare it to be responsible for all manner of ills and unacceptable behaviour. While their husbands are allowed mistresses, second wives, and various relationships including homosexual ones, romance and love even within marriage are not only denied to them but are considered not in keeping with their status.

INDEPENDENCE/PARTITION/ZAMINDARI ABOLITION

For the zamindars of Gangauli – and for many others in the country, especially Muslims – the parallel movements for Independence and Partition were traumatic and confusing. They belonged to a generation that had come to believe that the British were all-powerful and could never be dislodged. They also believed that it was British rule that ensured their way of life and zamindari. But there are exceptions: Phunnan Miya's son participates in an attack on a nearby police station as part of the Quit India movement in 1942.

None of the zamindars or their family members are active in the national movement. They are sceptical of the motives of the Congress and of its symbol, Gandhi. In their own village they see a dalit, Parsuram, who – as described earlier in this essay – first becomes a Congress worker and then a small-time leader making speeches and “inciting people.” The zamindars, as can be expected, perceive this transformation as a blow to the caste hierarchy and to zamindari itself.

Although many of the zamindars vote for the Muslim League, the party holds out little hope for them. Most of them cannot fully conceptualise a division of the country on communal lines, and do not yet perceive a future in which people of the majority religion would dominate politically. Since Gangauli and Ghazipur are not going to be part of Pakistan the zamindars in the novel are mostly not very interested in the idea of its creation, although some young men of the village – including some from zamindar families, such as Hammad's older son – are its ardent proponents.

Communal propaganda and polarisation, and then the terrible riots that break out before and after Independence, do, however, alarm and dislocate these families. The exodus of their sons and sons-in-law to Pakistan is a tragedy that leaves them broken and grieving. Many sons-in-law leave without their wives and children and soon start new families in their new homes, adding further to the burden of sorrow that now seems to be the fate of most of the zamindar families. Gangauli's Hakim Sahib says to Masoom's father:

ई पाकिस्तान त हिंदू-मुसलमानन को अलग करे को बना रहा। बाकी हम
त ई देख रहें कि ई मियाँ-बीवी, बाप-बेटा और भाई-बहिन को अलग कर
रहा। (p. 284)

I thought that Pakistan was made to divide Hindus and Muslims, but what I'm seeing is that it is dividing husbands and wives, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters.

Partition is followed by the abolition of zamindari. Nothing can save the Shia zamindars of Gangauli and their way of life any more. They hang on as long as they can to their decaying homes, their depleted larders, the growing numbers of their unmarried daughters, and their much-diminished Moharram observances, but they know it is a losing battle.

The novel ends with death. Phunnan Miya dies alone without sharing his last thoughts with anyone, but Hakim Sahib dies only after saying what he has to say about the unfairness of all that his community and he have had to endure. He calls out to his father and laments that he and others like him have not been able to save the land they inherited. He wails:

गाँधी कहिन कि ऊ चमटोली और भरटोलीवालन की है। . . . जमींदारी त
ज़रूर गयी बाकी गाँव एकदममे से बदल गया है . . . हम पाकिस्तान ना
जा सकते मौला को छोड़के. . . हे बाबा! तूँ गवाह रहियो, हम गाँधिया को
माफ़ कर रहें . . . (p. 343)

Gandhi said that it [the land] belonged to those living in the Chamar and Bhar quarters. Zamindari was destroyed, yes, and the village changed completely. But I could not leave Maula [Hazrat Hussain who was believed to come to Gangauli on one of the ten days of Moharram] and go to Pakistan. O my father! As you are my witness, I forgive Gandhi . . . [it is customary to forgive one's enemies before one's death].

The end of zamindari, the dispossession of zamindars by those far below them in the social hierarchy, the making of Pakistan, and the changed village are all inseparable parts of a tragic whole for the dying man and his dying class.

From the moribund society of zamindars, however, emerge very different descendants. Some of the zamindars' sons migrate to Pakistan and become military officers and civil servants. They leave behind their wives and children and acquire new ones. Others

who stay behind, close to their roots, become lawyers, bankers, teachers, professors, Communists, poets, writers, and academics.

One of the daughters of a zamindar family, Saeeda, horrifies her family and community by becoming, shortly before Independence, the first woman university graduate from the village. She proceeds on what her family regards as the road to perdition by becoming the first woman from the village to get a job, doing so at a time when the zamindars are horrified even by the idea of their sons being employed. With the hardships and inflation of the war years, however, the money Saeeda sends her parents helps them to cope. When all that is left of zamindari is a bundle of useless “Compensation Certificates,” it is her mother who can wear new clothes at Moharram and Eid. When the other zamindar wives, their wardrobes reduced to patched and darned garments, criticise Saeeda’s independent ways, their judgement is laced with envy. The books and ideas and style Saeeda brings to the village attract the girls and young women to her side. The glimpses of a new and better future that she shares with them brighten their dull and sorrowful world, and the path that she has chosen in the face of bitter opposition promises to open up for them as well.

Aadha Gaon, therefore, apart from its literary merit, is one of the few novels in Hindi that describes the lives, culture, and lifestyle of the people of a specific community – the Shia Muslim landlords of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The relationships of the members of this community with each other, with neighbouring landlords, and with the different classes of people that inhabit their village and its neighbourhood are brought to life in ways that are endearing, infuriating, shocking, but always interesting.

Gangauli and the region in which it is located went through an upheaval in the years immediately before and after Independence. For all the change, however, many features of life in Gangauli and the surrounding region remain unchanged to this day. The hunger, poverty, caste bias, unemployment, and educational impoverishment that the people of Gangauli and its environs continue to experience have their roots in the economic, social, and political relations described in *Aadha Gaon*.

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