

**IRONY, HUMOUR AND SATIRE IN RAMESH K. SRIVASTAVA'S  
"COOPERATIVE COLONY"**

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Ramesh K. Srivastava's "Cooperative Colony" is an excellent short story full of irony, wit, humour and satire. Srivastava is a prolific writer who has to his credit five collections of short stories and two novels—*Neema* (1984) and *Coils of the Serpent* (2011). The story under discussion is an ironical commentary on the working of Cooperative movement in India. Karnail Singh points out that "the writer has a dig at the system which pretends to provide for the weaker sections of society by raising a colony; but in actual practice it precludes the weaker section from enjoying this facility, for the former has impoverished the latter beyond recovery" (Singh 306). H. L. Sharma calls it "a satirical portrayal of the government-sponsored cooperative projects which breed corruption, promote selfishness and opportunism, and harm the poor and the downtrodden in whose name a lot of money is siphoned off from the government exchequer" (Sharma 118-119).

Cooperative Colony was a residential colony consisting of about one hundred houses mostly for weaker sections of the society on a heavy subsidy from the state government. To facilitate its smooth functioning, many professionals like physician, lawyer, professor, businessman, banker, teacher, policeman, Pandit, wrestler, watchman, sweeper, cowherd and shepherd—people from all walks of life were also given accommodation so as to make this colony self-sufficient in all respects. The intention was to move towards a better India of tomorrow "where people of all castes, creeds and professions can live in the spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding" (*Cooperative* 27).

Unfortunately, such idealistic schemes of the government mostly end up in failure and this is what precisely happens with this project. After occupying the subsidized houses in the colony, most professionals fail to honour their commitment for rendering free service to other residents of the colony. The lawyer stopped giving free legal advice; physician gave no medical assistance; professor, the Pandit, teacher, policemen, watchman, banker—all changed and stopped giving free service or advice. Seth Popat Lal discontinued letting others use his phone free of charge, even for informing the police about the thief. Sher Singh, the Police Inspector, becomes arrogant and uses abusive terms. Professor Vidya Nath corrects grammar of speakers rather than doing anything. The watchman was not visible around and his whistle was reportedly lost. When Professor Vidya Nath corrects someone's English, the lawyer Tarak Ram advises him not to do so free of charge. Another person advises the lawyer not to give free advice to the professor. Adarsh Khanna points out that "the author attacks the self-seeking people of all

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professions . . . each one of them wearing a mask of goodness and nobility to hide his selfishness, greed, inhumanity and hard-heartedness” (Khanna 59).

This is put to test when an aspiring applicant for a residential accommodation in the colony fails to collect the requisite amount of one thousand rupees and was trying for a job of a night watchman as incidents of molestation were becoming frequent in the colony. During his act of protecting the physician’s daughter, Garib Das was mistaken as a thief and was locked up in a public lavatory. Now people assemble before the lavatory to make him come out. The steel rod of his umbrella is mistaken for a gun and none dares to take a risk of his life in bringing the thief out. At the end, he turns out to be poor man appropriately named Garib Das who wanted to have a watchman’s job for survival as well as for an accommodation in the Cooperative Colony but he dies, leaving behind Rs nine hundred and sixty two rupees which are looted posthumously by the residents of the colony.

The short story is a stinging satire on the greed and selfishness of the people who promise anything to claim benefits and then forget about their promises. Throughout the story, Srivastava has ridiculed such people by his powerful wit, irony, humour and satire. To begin with, he gives a caricature of the minister by playing upon words which make the education minister almost uneducated in pronouncing English words written in Devanagari (Hindi) script in such a way that they carry altogether different, distorted or even perverted meanings and implications. His speech is flooded with blunders and howlers. The colony was an experiment for inhabitation but the minister uses words wrongly—“cohabitation.” He further employs “transformer” for transformation, “liar” for lawyer, “physicist” for physician, “breastling” for wrestling, “cheater” for teacher, “colonial rule” for widespread cooperative ventures, “coward” for cowherd and “prostitute” for prostrate. He goes on using horrifying expressions for institutions, such as, “nursery” for nurses, “infantry” for infants and “adultery” for adults. While such expressions constantly provoke laughter, they also show the incompetence of the minister as well as of those who prepared his speech.

Neeta Maini points out that “Srivastava has blessedly an abundance of humour which makes his short stories so lively, interesting and enjoyable” (Maini 194). In an interview with M. L. Mehta, Srivastava clarified his position on the use of irony, humour and satire: “Since humour, irony and satire are part of everyday life, there is no reason why they should not be presented in a work of realistic art. Besides, a good work must be readable before it conveys anything. I am told humour and irony make my writing fairly interesting. Satire obviously is to demolish those institutions, individuals, customs and traditions, which have outlived their use” (Mehta 17). Srivastava introduces humour and satire through characterization and dialogues, similes and metaphors, puns and double-edged expressions.

There is in the story an abundance of comic images—both similes and metaphors— which, while presenting the picture of a person, makes the story interesting. Some of the comparisons in these images give exaggerated accounts, are often odd and disproportionate, having mythological allusions and political references as also using ironical and satirical shades in the expressions. The Minister for Education and Cooperation has “a big toothpaste brand smile;” his teeth bent, twisted and yellowing are “like half-sunk milestones;” his thick lips “like double bumpers of a dilapidated truck” and his act of cutting ribbon “as if it were Supnakha’s nose” (*Cooperative* 25). For giving a speech, the Minister opened his “trunk-like mouth” and began to roar like a truck. After the speech, he sat down “like a buffalo that has just been

milked.” Police Inspector Sher Singh had a pair of mustachios “like two tufts of black coloured coconut fibres.” Some children had stones “like Hanuman and his monkey army;” an old man had a walking stick, and a teacher a green sapling—“his trademark.” The wrestler had a mace “like that of Bhima.” One lady had a pair of tongs while the other had a rolling pin which she had used frequently on her husband.

In the story, according to Swati Srivastava, “the dialogues are not only witty, but full of puns, jokes, insults, humiliations and wisecracks” (Srivastava 103). When the students request the Pandit to chant some *mantras* to make the thief come out of lavatory, he becomes angry and says, “Tomorrow when you go to the lavatory and if you don’t have motion, you’ll ask Panditji to chant *mantras* for you” (*Cooperative* 29). For some people, “I.P.C.” could be the abbreviated form of “Illegal Police Custody” instead of Indian Penal Code. When a dog comes out of the lavatory, Police Inspector Sher Singh calls him “*sala*” and a person quips: “The dog is related to the policeman. He called him *sala*—brother-in-law. That is why the policemen are called dogs.” One of the four boys slapped the Police Inspector who “fell down like Humpty-Dumpty” (*Cooperative* 33).

No one was willing to open the door of the lavatory in which the thief was supposedly hiding. Some people thought that “the most lily-livered man” Seth Popat Lal was moving forward to open the door, but they were surprised to find that he was going not to open but to bolt it from outside, fearing that the thief might not otherwise hurt him. When the Seth’s son ridicules the courage of the wrestler in not proceeding to open the door of the lavatory, the latter threatens to drink the former’s blood, but people warn him: “He has in his veins the blood of the fly-sucker Seth Popat Lal . . . Even mosquitoes die after stinging him” (*Cooperative* 35). When the wrestler finally did jump and opened the door, the thief’s gun was found to be the upper tip of his broken umbrella. The fellow instead of the thief turned out to be a poor person whose unconscious body was brought out of the lavatory, but whose heart was still throbbing. When people urged the physician to diagnose the person’s illness, Dr Kailash declined to do so without his consultation fee, and people called his name “Kill-us or Callous” instead of Kailash by using the pun (*Cooperative* 37). The person died and he was confirmed to be a beggar. The physician’s daughter corroborated that she was being protected by the person at midnight from a molester who had beaten him for saving her and had locked him up in the lavatory.

The newly arrived four students tried to collect some money for the beggar’s cremation at the rate of twenty-five paise each, calculating that out of about 200 people, at least fifty rupees will be collected, but as they began to do so, the people left the place with various excuses. The students could collect only three rupees and seventy-five paise, and their comment was: “That is barely enough for a bottle of beer” (*Cooperative* 38) which shows that they were as callous and insensitive as others residents of the colony were. The Pandit refuses to perform obsequial rites free of charge because he had to go to the Seth’s house for his son’s nail-cutting ceremony.

The students searched the body of the beggar and found in an elongated cloth bag an amount of nine hundred and sixty two rupees. The moment the money was found, the policeman wanted the amount to be deposited in the police station. Pandit Ram Das was ready to perform the obsequies rites for the dead man’s money which, he felt, should go to a Brahmin. When they wanted to give some money to the wrestler for showing bravery in opening the door of the lavatory, the latter said, he did not know who had pushed him there from the wall. As the students were holding the money, a crushing crowd fell on them and each one tried to grab

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whatever he could “like dogs pouncing upon a few pieces of bone” (*Cooperative* 40). The dead body of the poor fellow was abandoned at that very spot while everyone of them present there left the place.

Garib Das, according to the paper found with him, was a refugee from Lahore (Pakistan). His wife had died of illness. His daughter was raped and he had got no help from either the policeman or the lawyer. His son died a vagabond. After hearing of the good locality of Cooperative Colony, he had begged day and night but failed to collect the requisite amount of one thousand rupees to become eligible for an accommodation in the Cooperative Colony. He wrote: “If I die before I have a thousand rupees . . . my money should go to the welfare of the residents of the Cooperative Colony” (*Cooperative* 41).

The story, which was buzzing with fun and frolic, ends up anticlimactically on a tragic note with a complete reversal of the situation. Neeta Maini points out that most of Srivastava’s stories “end up in ironic reversal of fortunes. In other words, the situation in the end is quite reverse to the situation in the beginning” (Maini 194). The threatening thief turns out to be a potential resident of the Colony. His desire to have an accommodation in the Colony ends up with his dead body lying there. His last wish, according to the paper found on his body was to give his saved amount for the wellbeing of the members of the Colony but it was looted by them. The members of the Cooperative Colony, instead of helping him by giving his body a decent cremation even with the fellow’s own money, harm him by abandoning it then and there unattended for the dogs. For H. L. Sharma, Garib Das symbolizes “the pathetic condition of millions of poor Indians who make futile attempts of acquiring a house” (Sharma 19).

The story is a harsh commentary on the people of the world who have become absolutely devoid of human values. Even though the residents, particularly professionals, must have given solemn assurances of mutual help and cooperation to the authorities before being allotted an accommodation, no such atmosphere is visible in the colony. Instead of helping each other, they satirize, ridicule or make fun of each other, giving the impression as if, instead of Cooperative Colony, it were a non-cooperative or even an antagonistic colony. It is a world portrayed in its stark nakedness. The people are extremely selfish and hence inconsiderate to each other.

The four boys in the story symbolize the new generation. They arouse the initial hope of some help and consideration for others. However, in slapping the Police Inspector and in firing at the so-called thief, they symbolize lawlessness and violence which are becoming common in the new generation. Their collection of fund for cremation of the dead body of Garib Das probably goes for liquor of which they had given a hint. By grabbing the collected contribution and Garib Das’s saved amount and, furthermore, by abandoning his dead body to dogs without its cremation, the younger generation proves to be much more inhuman and devoid of human feelings than is the older generation. This way all the people, old and young, present a very grim picture of the society.

As far as the language of Srivastava is concerned, he has a complete command over English. It is simple, easy to read and is even interspersed with colloquial expressions in order to create the Indian atmosphere. He uses Hindi words like *haram-zade*, *chapattis*, *kinaris* and *sala*. To quote Karnail Singh, “the chief characteristic of Dr Srivastava’s prose style is its vividness and suppleness not wholly unrelated to an abounding energy of language that limps, walks and saunters at one moment but begins to run, soar and sweep the next” (*Singh* 308). Most similes and metaphors are from common life.

Whereas many stories of Srivastava are idealistic with happy endings and without loose ends, the present story ends up tragically. For Adarsh Khanna, the story presents “stark and grim realities behind the well-orchestrated façade of the glitter and shine of life” (Khanna 60). H. L. Sharma points out that in introducing a comic mode in stories through humour, fun and pun, Srivastava follows the footsteps of Narayan and Khushwant Singh “and succeeds well in using a lighter vein for importing a serious message” (Sharma 120). When questioned by Y. Joy as to why did he not confine himself to a single tone, Srivastava’s reply was that a writer usually confines to a single theme or tone but “to make it readable, interesting and enjoyable, introduction of minor digressions, anecdotes, wit, irony and humour may be desirable” (Joy 376). With the help of irony, humour and satire, Srivastava has indeed castrated the entire society of various professions since people in the name of cooperation show their utter selfishness and inhumanity.

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