
From Gafur to Mr. Benedict: Allegories of Labour Exploitation from Drought to Contemporary Academia and The Mysterious Benedict Society

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Abstract: This study examines the short story *Drought* written by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee as a powerful literary depiction of labour exploitation in a rural, feudal society. Through the tragic experiences of the peasant Gafur, the narrative exposes how oppressive power structures behave towards the vulnerable. Further, the paper explores how similar dynamics of subjugation exploit educators in working conditions with excessive workloads and administrative domination. By situating these issues within the context of labour abuse, the analysis highlights the urgent need for comprehensive reforms for the well-being of both agrarian and intellectual labour sectors.

Keywords: Labour exploitation, literary allegory, *Drought*, feudal oppression, academic labour, systemic inequality, rural hardship, precarity, critical pedagogy, social justice

Introduction: Born in the West Bengali village of Debanandapur in the Hooghly district, Sarat Chandra had a brief literary career. According to Sarker's article, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee: The Great Humanist, he has written thirty-six books, but those were not longer than 200 pages. Sarker states that he is one of the most read authors in Bengali, according to the survey taken by the Department of Modern Indian Languages of Culcutta University in 1975. He too has recorded that the Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, has commented on Sarat Chandra Chatterjee that,

Sarat Chandra's vision has delved deep into the mysteries of the heart of the Bengalis. He has portrayed so vividly the varied creation made up of happiness and grief, union and separation, as to enable the Bengalis to see themselves. The proof of this we see in the exhaustible pleasure imparted by that creation. The Bengalis have never been so sincerely happy with the writings of anyone else as they have been with Sarat' Chandra's writings. No doubt other writers have received praise, but none could gain that universal hospitality in the public heart as he has done. This is not startled

admiration but love... His words touch the most tender spots in the lives of the Bengalis. (Sarker 51)

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, in his work titled *Drought*, portrays the dark side of humanity, which exploits the lives of other living beings in the world. Maurya, in his paper titled *Writing Drought, then and now: A comparative assessment of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's Drought and Anita Agnihotri's Remembering* records that Sarat Chandra Chatterjee is established and renowned for the humane depiction of countryside life. His works add, "Sarat Chandra's stories had an objective—that is, his overpowering desire to expose the social evils and rouse readers' consciences in this regard" (Maurya 64).

Humans have struggled for their existence whenever nature challenged them in the form of a natural calamity in any form. However, in the article *Writing Drought, then and now: A comparative assessment of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's The Drought and Anita Agnihotri's Remembering* Maurya states that drought is a complex issue in India as it is an agrarian country. In the article, he highlights that during such difficult times, it has a deadly direct impact on the lives of peasants and their livestock, which results in the malnutrition of human beings and livestock, the spread of diseases, and finally results in their migration. The story *Drought* is an exact depiction of such harsh realities. The story is set in the fictional village of Kashipur, which is stricken by the meteorological drought, affecting the village for more than two consecutive years; as a result, the production in the village had gone down. The main character in the story Gafur is dependent on agriculture, and the land belongs to the zamindar, Shibu Babu. The zamindar, instead of helping him, behaves without humanity and takes undue advantage of the situation by holding the straw of Gafur's share for non-payment of due where. The surrounding forces forced Gafur to migrate.

The dominant ownership and the exploitation of the workforce are clearly portrayed in the short story *Drought*. It could be understood how the oppressors are resilient to surge high, though they were surrounded by tough times that could drown them. Their love and care for the livestock is clearly portrayed, along with the downside of mental stability in such surroundings. Similarly, in the novel, *Mysterious Benedict Society*, the love for the society is portrayed by the risks taken by a group of children along with Mr. Benedict. It is essential to understand the power dynamics in the novel for a better insight and to explore that wherever dominance takes the upper hand, irrespective of the age there will definitely be resilient characters to sore high and help the society. However, in this paper I would like to discuss the labour exploitation in *Drought* by the Zamindars and cynical Mr. Curtain's behaviour in *Mysterious Benedict Society* with the suffering and exploitation of the intellectual labour in the academic environment. The dominance of the employer will be proved by examining the interactions that happen between the characters in the story and through the historical perspectives.

The origin of labour has deep historical roots, and in the article, *Empowering the Workforce: Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Labour Reform for Liberation and Welfare*, the writer has depicted the history as follows:

In ancient civilisations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, organised labour was often associated with agricultural practices, where peasants worked the land under the authority of rulers or landowners. Slavery was prevalent in various forms, and enslaved people were used for tasks ranging from agricultural work to construction and household chores. In ancient Greece and Rome, slavery was a fundamental part of the social and economic structure. Enslaved people were employed in agriculture and mining and as domestic servants. (Paramesh 3)

However, in the Indian context, it is the varna and caste that define the labour roles. The government took initiative to protect workers' rights by forming labour unions. Significantly, under the leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the states were informed to protect the justice, equality, humane work with decent rights of life, and fundamental rights of all citizens. Moreover, the government too ensures fair treatment for all individuals regardless of social status.

Drought ensures absolute control of the landowners over the peasants; similarly, the teachers are controlled and left with a lack of autonomy. When Gafur requests Zamindar, Shibu Babu, for some straw at least for Mahesh's cattle, he refuses and mocks at him by saying he should not act as if he cares for his cattle. This clearly illustrates that the employer, or the rich, is not bothered and concerned about the working class, as they are provided with all the comforts in the world. As the Zamindar shows indifference to the sufferer, even in the modern world, employers disregard the work of employees. Similarly, in the novel, *Mysterious Benedict Society* Mr. Curtain selects children as well as grown-ups and brain sweep their memories using Whisperer. Specifically, he uses orphan children to convey his ideas to the world. Particularly, it is quite high in the teaching profession, and the research paper titled *Occupational Stress and Ill Health for Staff in Private Universities, Tamil Nadu*, recorded an experiment result which was conducted to examine the workplace stress that could be associated with a lack of creativity. Its impact on professional and personal life proved highly threatening. Additionally, it states that

Qualitative research carried out at 15 Australian institutions, for example, suggests that staff have seen a significant rise in their stress levels in the previous five years. More than half of all university employees suggest that staff have seen a significant rise in their stress levels in support services; a high workload; inadequate leadership and management; a lack of advancement; a lack of job stability; and an inability to secure future employment. (Dhaneesh 2598)

Moreover, it is also stated that “greater levels of workplace stress were linked to a variety of factors, including job instability, poor working relationships, a lack of control over resources, and issues with effective communication” (Dhaneesh 2598) Therefore, it is essential to eliminate the stress in the workplace to create a healthier, more secured work environment from the dominance of power.

The suppression of Gafur in *Drought* imitates the struggle of teachers in their workplace. In the story, when Gafur was down with fever and taking rest, the priest approaches him and summons him the right reason for the bull not being taken for grazing. He even addresses him scoundrel and accuses him of banking the materials provided by the Zamindar. However, he refuses the alleged accusation, stating that he was deprived of his share as well as the bull’s share for the amount he owes the Zamindar. The same situation prevails in the working scenario in the academics, where the teachers undergo stress without job satisfaction. “Stress is believed to cause depression, irritation, anxiety, and fatigue and thus lower self-esteem and reduce job satisfaction.” (Sen 15)

Job insecurity, performance expectations, and continuous work are the main causes of stress among employees. Even in the story *Drought*, when Gafur expresses his inability to take the bull around for grazing due to his ill health, the priest summons his obedience and the condition of the bull irrespective of his health condition. Similarly, a teacher must understand the student’s needs and engage them in their learning experience. Further, it is the teacher who is held for the class performance. The teachers situation in the academic environment is

There’s never enough time in a day to get things done. Teaching five classes with four preps, doing lesson plans, grading papers, and all the other things involved in teaching keeps me plenty busy. Then, we get other things thrown at us: forms to fill out, inventory, sponsoring three clubs, participating in recreation, coaching a sport. The principal decides he wants a “course of study,” and the next year it’s something else. It makes me feel behind, buried in work. . All this prevents me from doing a good job in the classroom. Sometimes I don’t have the energy to even try. (Blase 13)

A teacher should be healthy and motivated because an impaired teacher’s health results in reduced teaching quality, says Maas in his paper. The same happens to Gafur in the story *Drought* as he was deprived of his basic needs, he fell sick and was not able to take care of the bull.

The workers were threatened by the employers with pay deductions and termination. In the story *drought*, Gafur was threatened by demanding him to observe and understand the reaction of the Zamindar if he got to know that the bull was not taken care of properly. Indirectly, it was conveyed that Gafur skin would peel. Here the dominance and the merciless heart of the individual are portrayed, not considering the level of work Gafur had done for

them when he was in good health. The same happens in the working scenario of the teacher, where they are continuously threatened by the deduction in pay for everything and lay off as if they question and seek clarity for the action taken by the hierarchy, and they are not bothered about how their reaction would affect the progress of the students.

Further, the threat would impact mental health, performance in the job, and personal life. It is said that it would lead to health issues and emotional breakdown of the teacher, like Gafir was affected in the story. The historical records have recorded the inhuman activities of the authority over the dependents with similar patterns of oppression. The workers were and are stripped of their autonomy and dignity, as noted by Paramesh. Moreover, the historical scenario of the suppression on the workers resonates with the contemporary life of the teachers. Though Gafir was unable to take personal care of the bull, he ensured it was provided with the necessary intake for it to survive; however, from outside, it was considered that he was behaving inhumane and not worried about the bull. The same is the situation of the teachers in the academic sector, where they were loaded with administrative work along with record maintenance and with limited time for preparation of the class. Finally, the teachers were pointed out for the low performance of the child.

Gafir was denied his share of money, pointing to his default in dues, which is also common in educational institutions in the term loss of pay. In the story, Gafir borrowed some amount and was unable to repay, hence his share of money was denied. The situation is quite contradictory in the educational sector, where the teachers were denied their right due, called salary, for non-completion of the work. The situation persists because of the limitation of the time. When a teacher works in such a situation, definitely it is not possible for them to perform better as expected. The situation would move them deep into stress and would shatter their personal lives as Gafir harmed his daughter for conveying to him that there was no food and water left in the house. The continuous summons he received from the power to execute his duty even during illtimes is also the present scenario of the teachers, where they are forced to sign the bond and submit the certificates to receive their rightful remuneration. They were also deprived of any holidays, including public holidays, and they remain quiet with the pain for the welfare of the family.

Gafir's plight and the modern educational environment surrounding certain sectors explicitly reveal the exploitation of labour by the power dynamics. The struggle of the Gafir reveals the harsh realities of the agricultural workers in the hands of the power; the same happens in the educational environment, where the teachers are neglected, resulting in poor well-being and effectiveness. Drought barrens the land and leaves it less productive; similarly, if the teachers are burdened with more work, then it would diminish their capacity to nurture students effectively. The exploitation of the workforce in both sectors not only affects the individuals but also the society, as agriculture and education are the foundational for development. A comprehensive approach is needed for addressing the issue for the well-being of the farmers and educators for stability in the society.

In conclusion, Chatterjee's depiction of Gafur, a peasant who suffered by the drought and power dynamics, serves as the allegory for the contemporary struggles faced by educators in the modern academic environment. The parallels drawn between the suppression of the Gafir and the labour challenges faced by the teachers in the modern academic environment highlight the persistent cycle of dominance and subjugation. It is very essential to protect both from the struggles for the well-being of society. This investigation not only honours Chatterjee's literary legacy but also calls for a critical reflection to enhance the lives of individuals in both the agrarian and educational sectors.

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