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**PORTRAYAL OF RURAL SOCIETY IN PANNALAL PATEL'S
*MANVINI BHAVAI***

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VIDHYAYANA

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VIDHYAYANA

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Abstract:

Pannalal Patel (1912-1989) is an innate and prestigious quality literary artist. His literary work *Manvini Bhavai* is considered the masterpiece of a regional novel. The translator professor V Y Kantak who translated the novel as *Endurance: A Droll Saga in English* is an eminent academician and critic, has very successfully retained the essential simplicity, the regional flavor and the original spirit of the novel in English translation as closely as possible. Pannalal's sensitive heart comprehends the various experiences of rural life in such a way that we feel human life breathing and beating in a natural way and in his novels. *Manvini Bhavai* is a great masterpiece of Gujarati literature because of his inborn literary spontaneous talent and potential. He has successfully spread the fragrance of native land in the novel. Each novel of Pannalal is the reflection of society in its naked form and *Manvini Bhavai* is not an exception. Each chapter of the novel puts a mirror before the society that gives us the exact picture of the time in which it has been penned. The characters, setting, and every aspect of the novel is bubbling through the rural life.

Pannalal in *Manvini Bhavai* describes the people of North Gujarat of Sabarkantha region, their life style, festivals, customs, rituals, communal ceremony etc. The novel is written with a focus on the Degadia village and a hilly area to it in the North-East region of Idar in Gujarat. It describes the great famine of Chhappaniyo of 1900. The contemporary society is filled with life style and culture of the farmers and other local communities such as Thakarada and Patels. Each and every page, chapter, character, setting, plot are full of rural description. The novelist has realistically depicted different aspects of rural Gujarat. In fact no other writer can describe rural life so naturally and artistically as Pannalal because he was born and brought up in rural atmosphere, so he had observed rural life style closely.

Key Words: Rural life style, customs, rituals, community, superstitions, peasants' culture



VIDHYAYANA

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Rural Background:

Apparently, it is a story of love between Kalu and Raju, but the underlying story is that of hard and tragic life of farmers. It is a story of the people born and brought up in the village, the story of their struggle to survive. The pangs of hunger and utter humiliation of the villagers during famine are brought out sharply and minutely. Pannalal in his own words confesses: "In short, my own impression is found on my works". (Pramodkumar 1984: 22. Trans). The village life of North-East Gujarat is presented here. The life of this region depends on agriculture and the agriculture much depends on Monsoon. The lives of the poor farmers become miserable when the rain does not arrive. The novel describes the rural life of the author himself where he lived and experienced life very closely and minutely. Everything connected with rural life, its customs and manners, its traditions and conservatism, its fairs and festivals, its religious outlook and superstitious atmosphere, its hard labor and poverty, its love and separation, its agriculture and productions, its life style and dialects, is presented here with realistic touch by Pannalal Patel.

The rural society presented by Pannalal Patel is better known for its customs, traditions and superstitions. Customs and manners are the system to sustain individual life bound up with society. Here in *Manvini Bhavai* Pannalal has reflected customs and manners of the North Gujarat region like child birth ceremony, child engagement, inviting the whole community for the feast on happy and sad occasions, allowing two wives at a time, the supremacy of panch etc.

Customs and Traditions of Rural Society:

Pannalal has depicted the birth ceremony of the protagonist. At the time of Kalu's birth Vala Patel has to offer something special to his sister as a part of ritual on happy occasion. On the sixth day there is a naming ceremony of the child. Vala Patel finds a Brahmin for the astrology and horoscope that are to be prepared with a hope for the better future of the child. Vala sends invitations to all the villagers to remain present on this occasion. He *speaks*: "Kindly come brother; a *Purani* has arrived; the child's naming ceremony is to be performed" (EDS-15). In no time, Vala's tiny front room is full of village folks. The astrologer asks Vala Patel to sit in front of him and he reads the child's future. He says any name beginning with *Ka*, *Cha* or *Gha* will be appropriate. He also suggests some customary names and finally 'Kalu' name is finalized.



VIDHYAYANA

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An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Child's marriage is also one of the notable customs of the rural community. After a few months of Kalu's birth, Gala's wife gives birth to a girl child. Fulima decides without wasting time, she directly talks to Gala's wife; "You must take it for a fact that this girl's betrothal to Vala Patel's son, has already taken place" (EDS-30). Thus, with the birth of the daughter the engagement between Kalu and Raju is fixed. The families of both the sides meet and finalise the relation. The *Barot* is called for clearing the ground of family background. When everything is clear, a custom of eating *Kansar* takes place to finalise the engagement. Therefore Fulima says to the girl's family;

That's fine, but let someone of your family come to the boy's house and eat Kansar with all of us, by way of celebration. Only then can I take it as confirmed. (EDS-32)

One more custom of rural folk is to receive wedding message with pomposity. When the Brahmin arrives with wedding message, the boy's family receives him with joy, offers him charpoy to sit. Neighbour women are invited to sing songs. They sing marriage songs and get the true enjoyment. There are many such marriage songs in *Manvini Bhavai* echoing the customs of the North part of Gujarat. One such song is;

There is in the North a great storm is brewing,

O eager one!

Yes, a rain-storm is brewing in the North my dear.

And I know, the peacock of my heart's near,

O eager one!

Yes, he comes-that stealer of the hearts, my dear.

Some other customs mentioned in the novel like New Year and cow-race on this day. On a New Year Day the village women clean up their houses, collect the garbage in the broken pots and dump it outside the village. With this cleaning they believe that they have left the last year's grouses behind. On this day the barber Shiva goes house to house to bathe the villagers who generally take bath once a fortnight. The cow race is also arranged on the New Year Day. People bring the cows and bulls in an open ground for the race. Bells are bound round the necks of the cows and their horns are decorated with colours. They release the cows and they run with madness. Kalu hopes that his cow named Gauri will win the race. When the race is over, Ramo says to Kalu, "Gauri came first this time..." (EDS-223)



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

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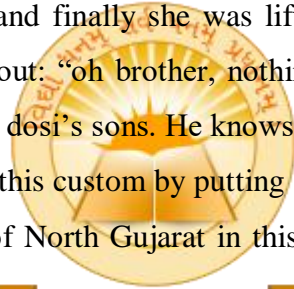
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Rituals after the death of a person are also a remarkable custom of the North Gujarat rural society. Many deaths can be seen in the novel. But the deaths of Vala Patel, Rupa and Mali reflect customary elements. There are certain customs after deathlike reading *Garudapurana*, scattering of ashes, and feast for the community, offering condolences by the people of the community etc. After the death of Vala Patel, Kalu arranged the funeral feast on the twelfth day and almost five hundred people from the community were invited for the feast.

Rupa at the dying moment calls Kalu and makes him take a pledge not to bring a second wife in the presence of the first one. While taking pledge, Kalu replies:

There I give you my word in the names of my forefathers: I will not take a second wife while one is living. (EDS-177)

There is a custom of putting dead body on the sacramental square on the ground known as *choko*. Rupa's dead body is taken down on this *choko* and finally she was lifted for cremation. When Mali dies, she is placed on the pyre and someone blurted out: "oh brother, nothing is placed in her mouth" (EDs-364). On hearing this, Kalu felt disgusted with Mali dosi's sons. He knows the importance of such custom. Though he was cursed and abused by Mali, he fulfils this custom by putting a piece of his own ring in her mouth. Thus, Pannalal has highlighted many customs of North Gujarat in this novel right from birth to death of human beings.



VIDHYAYANA

Superstitious beliefs:

Superstitious beliefs in ghosts, witches and supernatural elements existed in rural society during those days. Credulous people consider religious beliefs as their ideal. They become innocent victims and they are deceived and exploited in the name of religion. One such belief is to prepare horoscope or predict future of the newly born child by observing different signs. Vala Patel calls one such Brahmin astrologer who can predict his child's future. The villagers gather with curiosity to become the witness of such predictions. The Brahmin predicts Kalu's future to Vala Patel;

Your boy will develop into a self-reliant person, old man... without official Mukhihood he will rule like a Mukhi... and be a natural leader of men. He will



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

tether a mare in his front—yard. He will make a name in his community. (EDS-16, 17)

When asked how much he will live, he predicts: “Even longer than you” (EDs-17). When further asked about Kalu’s marriage, the Brahmin replied: “Two wives are indicated, kaka!” (EDS-17) And at the time of leaving the Brahmin takes out a *Yantra* talisman and gives it to Vala saying: “Take this. Tie it to your son’s arm after purifying it with *Dhoop*.”

It seems that *Bhuvo* is one of the indispensable parts of rural culture. The innocent people are cheated by such *Bhuvas* and opportunists. But some brave persons like Fulima and Vala Patel who expose such fraud *Bhuvas*. Fulima catches one such *Bhuva* and makes him confess. Instead of appreciating her guts, the villagers started calling her a witch after this incident. They started making strange rumours about this old lady. It was said that the old woman had been seen going towards river on *Kali Chaudas* (the fourteenth day of moonless night preceding Diwali Day). Others reported: “There are those who have seen her sitting in deep meditation riding on an alligator’s back!” (EDS-36)

Vala Patel himself did not believe in witches though almost all his life he did desperately take resources to counter magic. He tried every time to drive away evil spirit to save each of the children. After that experience, he had reached the firm conviction; “Witches, ghosts, evil spirit... and so forth, is all bunk- just nonsense talk” (EDS-12). But like other villagers, Vala Patel had one belief to have a boy heir to lead his family ahead. Earlier he did not believe a son as the future support in old age. God had granted him half a dozen children but he believed that they were granted as playthings for a year or two and then returning back to God. Although his wife and other villagers believed that a vile witch of a woman, practising the black art had killed them off. And it is clear that witch was none other than Vala’s sister-in-law Mali. But at the time of Kalu’s birth, the old man started praying to God to bless him with a son;

Oh Bhagawan, the ship has already reached the end of the voyage. Grant me now this little thing of flesh and blood, grant me an able-bodied son! (EDS-7)

Thus, Vala has a deep faith and belief in god. When Mali was cursing his family and fighting with Rupa, an anguished cry broke from Vala’s heart. He silently entreated Bhagawan;

Nothing is hidden from you oh lord! You know, I do not wish to enter into a conflict. Why should I fight when the thousand armed one is keeping watch over



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

me? (EDS-21)

As he entered the house, the first thing he did was to pass the Brahmin's *Yantra* through Dhoop incense fumes and tie it to his son's arm as advised. Superstitious nature of Vala Patel can be seen here.

When Raju's husband Dayalji was ill, she accepted that *Hakims* (ignorant practitioner in medical fields) had failed to cure her husband. Kalu advises to seek help from *Vaidya* and herbal treatment. She knows that this sorcerer has done nothing but went on demanding goats and cocks to propitiate the evil spirits. He ate *Kansar* and opium and did nothing. When Kalu advises her to take Dayalji to a *bava* shows that even the main characters are also not free from such ignorance and superstitions. Kalu advises;

If you would say, why not getting that *bava* of the *Bhabhuteswar Mahadev* to treat him? He is a genuine sort... So it might work, you know. (EDS-261, 262)

The villagers also believe in good and bad omen. A false belief prevails in the villages of this region that if a woman does farming work, it is considered ill-omen and it will not rain and crops will fail that year. Rupa was not coward but helpless so she joined her son in farming. The villagers started criticising and blaming her for the ill-omen that they will have to face now. They gathered and started cursing Rupa for breaking the village tradition;

You have ruined us; you whore, brought shame on the family. You have made it impossible for that wretched boy to look up for every shame... Be you damned! (EDS-77)

Not only Mali and Parama but entire village was stunned and grieving. They felt this woman had brought ill-omen to the village. There were even more angry reactions. They demanded;

This truly has done the dirt on us all, shamed the village, the whole region... Drag the old woman down among the clods and pass the levelling board over her... Otherwise... remember she has handled the plough, see if a single grain will grow in our fields! There will be famine, yes famine. (EDS-77)

The above lines show that the villagers were completely under the grip of such false beliefs and were about to do injustice to Rupa due to their superstitious nature. But Rupa fearlessly objected and challenged the villagers that she would not go under the levelling plank. Pannalal through Rupa voices against such



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

false beliefs. Finally it rained and Rupa was survived. Now there is a change in the villagers' attitude. They respect Rupa, beg her pardon and call her Rupama for this miracle of bringing rain.

Rural Lifestyle:

Fairs and festivals are part and parcel of rural society. For rural folk fairs and festivals are part of religion and tradition. Here Pannalal has reflected a true mirror of the rural region. There is a reference of *Zala's* fair in the novel. The fair is an occasion for young boys and girls to meet, fall in love, enjoy, sing songs, wear new dresses, eat delicious food, drink and make shopping. The village culture is fully exposed in such fairs. It becomes an occasion for young boys and girls to show new fashions of the villages. So Pannalal in this novel describes them realistically with their peculiarities in dress and style. He narrates;

He (Kalu) had wild flowers tucked to his ears and carried a bow and arrows.

Kodar carried a sword and Bhaga bore an iron tipped staff in his hand. (EDS-149)

Pannalal also describes different festivals with rural atmosphere and traditions. For example, on the New Year Day people got their bath by village barber and then enjoy the cow-race. On Uttarayan, the people of Ishan region play hockey. It brings bat and ball game with it. On the day of Holi the farmers lay off their harvesting and thrashing operations. Women indulge in singing songs full of sexual innuendoes flinging them at one another as is customary and permitted at the time of Holi. The men start their circular dance with *dandias* (folk dance of Gujarat).

The novelist has tried to create a true picture of rural society by using regional dialect of North Gujarat. He has used dialectical words in speech by evoking its modes, idioms, proverbs and folk songs. There are number of examples of regional dialect from the novel such as; "what can a *Vaidya* do to one whose health is wholesome" (EDS-36). "A good woman never curses; and the curses of an evil '*sankhni*' can never come true" (EDS-21). Pannalal also uses abuses and curses in this novel that are integral part of rural life. The village folk speak such words even in their routine life. Not only men but even women do not hesitate to speak such words. Here there is Mali dosi and her family to shower curses and abuses on Kalu and his family. For example;

Damn it, the betrothal is already gone through, done. Alright. But if ever I let



VIDHYAYANA

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

this black-faced fellow's marriage take place... go, call me a bitch. (EDS-48)

The region presented by Pannalal in Manvini Bhavai is full of people of various castes and communities. The novelist gives a very graphic picture of their customs and life style. He describes their rural outfit to mirror the villages of Ishan region of Gujarat. In the first chapter Pannalal gives a beautiful description of the outfit of Vala Patel. His outfit is like that of shepherd.

The same frilled pleated jacket and the dhoti was the short hand-woven kind common to the lower classes. True, the turban that was hitched to a peg on the wall was however of a finer weave and quality (EDS-6).

Pannalal further describes the dominance of community and Panch (the jury made of five members to settle the social issue) over the villages. People were forced to obey the orthodox and rigid conventions of the Panch either willingly or reluctantly. If anyone tries to refuse the established structure of the community, the leader of the Panch soon punishes him or her by throwing him out of the community. No one can challenge the decision and the authorities. When the engagement between Kalu and Raju is broken, Manor tells Ranchhod of the penalty decided by the panch and the community for breaking such relation without any deliberate reason. He says;

What is the point, my dear man; you are getting rid of one trouble by inviting another and possibly a worse one? The community will tear you to pieces... whatever fine the community might impose, whether it be my sister or on me, will have to be borne by you. The whole of it, mind you (EDS-114, 115).

In rural life a teacher and a Brahmin respected highly. The rural people gift them those grains and other eatables from time to time. In this novel there is a Kashi returned Brahmin invited by Vala Patel to have his son's horoscope. The Brahmin is warmly greeted and asked for lunch. People here consider Brahmin as Deity and his entry in their house sanctifies their home.

The novel also brings forth the pangs of love amidst starvation. Both Kalu and Raju are brought up and played together in the same village and love each other from the childhood. Their engagement is broken due to the jealousy and malice of the close relatives but their love has never become less for each other. The love story between Kalu and Raju shows the social atmosphere of the region of North Gujarat. Their love story witnesses the adverse circumstances, ups and downs due to social factors but in the end they are united.



VIDHYAYANA

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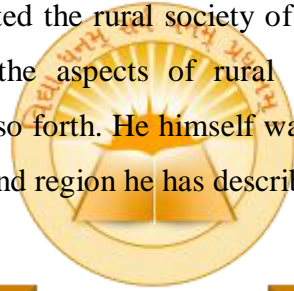
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Pannalal has artistically presented the effect of Chhappaniya famine of 1900 in the North region of Gujarat. The famine had its devastating effect on the region. Everywhere, there was a shortage of food and water. There was a loot and violence everywhere. The struggle for surviving against the famine shapes different characters. The struggle reaches its climax when we see men, women and children beating a buffalo to satisfy their hunger. There was the worst and terrible condition of human beings. Due to unbearable sights of his villagers Kalu curses God now and again. When he throws his naked sword before that hungry rabble of Bhil, he strode away cursing god:

Oh, you wicked God who visits this famine upon innocent people! May you be damned, you who drives men to such a state as this (332).

Thus the novel is full of terrible and pathetic scenes of hungry people. Many die and others are in a state of dying. Man kills man and animals. Even mother does not hesitate to kill her own child.

Thus, Pannalal has realistically reflected the rural society of the north Gujarat region in this novel. He has artistically focused on almost all the aspects of rural life, its hope, customs, rituals, religion, superstitions, and lifestyle and so on and so forth. He himself was born and brought up in rural atmosphere so he was very well aware of the society and region he has described.



VIDHYAYANA



VIDHYAYANA

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www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

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VIDHYAYANA